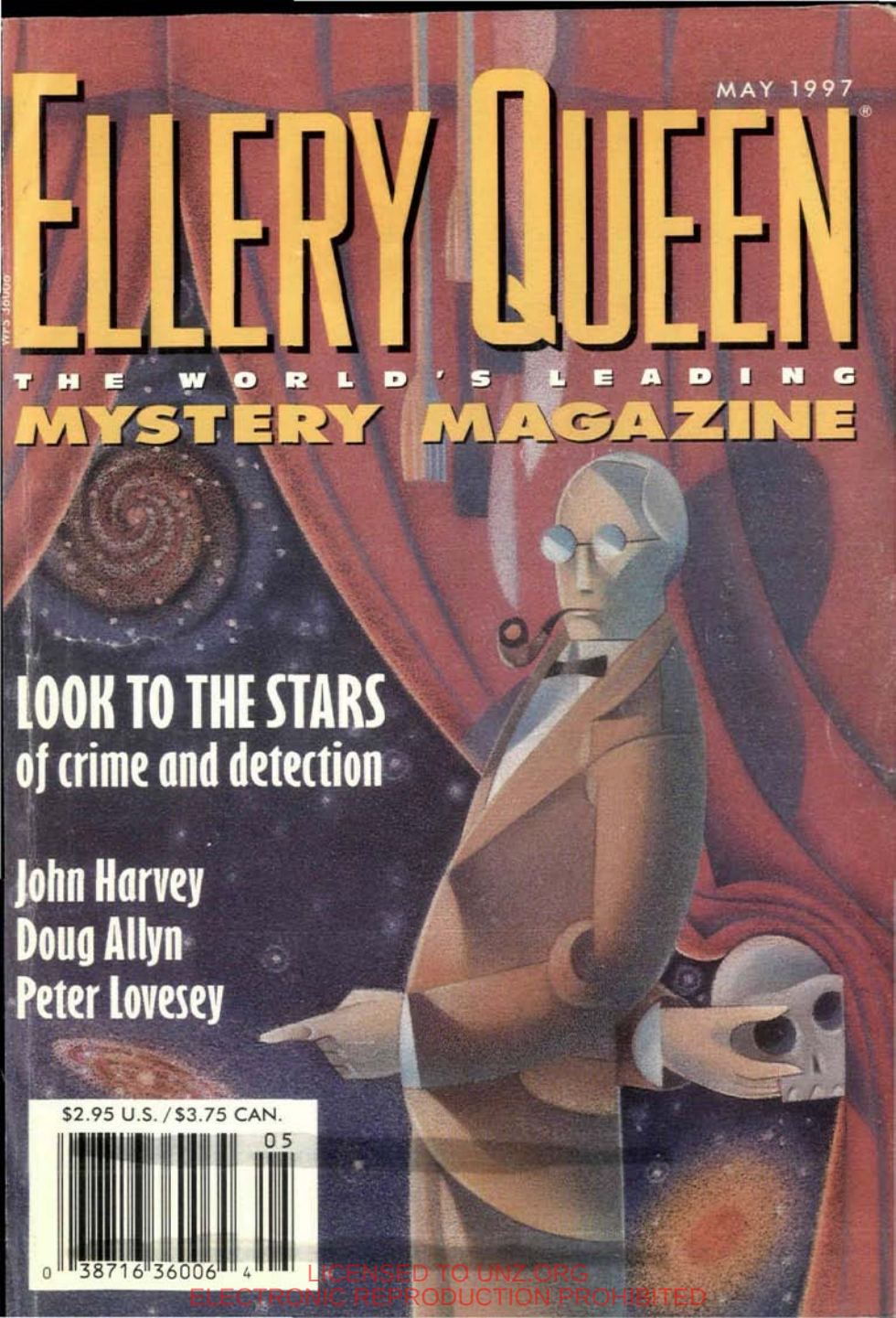

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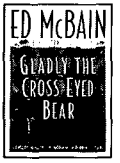

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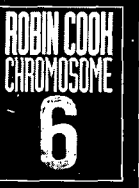

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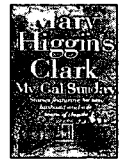

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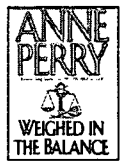

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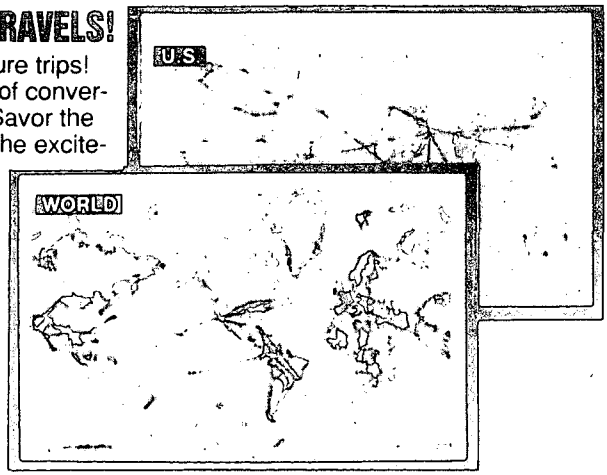

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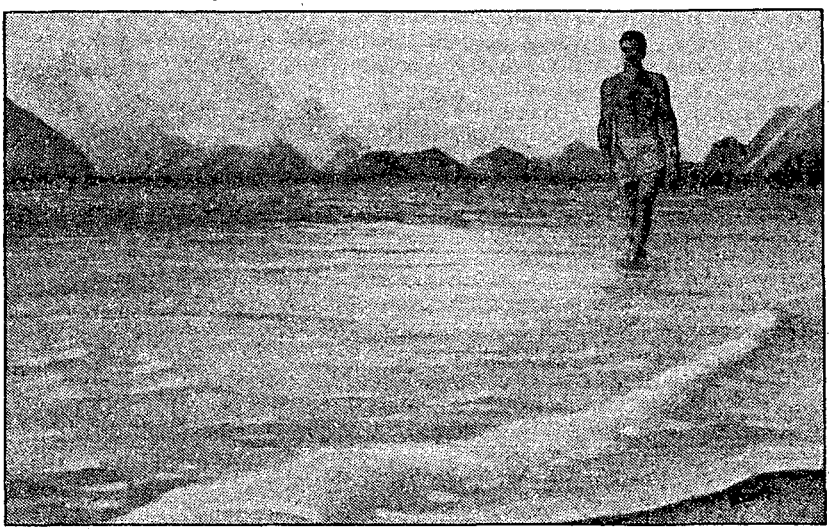

Art by Darryl Elliott

The Beaches of Paraguay

by Doug Allyn

It was one of those perfect evenings, the kind you never forget. Pete Boothe and I were sitting on the back deck of my wife's home, watching the sun melt into the Algoma hills, shadows lengthening, the sky darkening to gold, then copper, and then a deeper purple. We'd had a few beers, but nothing heavy, not like our college days at Michigan State when we could drink horse dribble till dawn and still cope with classes. Sort of.

We were older now by a decade and more, but holding up fairly well, I thought. Pete was still lanky, with the same rumpled puppy looks that used to melt coed hearts. I'm shorter, more intense, and a lot less lovable.

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He's done it again! Doug Allyn has made it to the top of your list in the Readers Award competition for the fourth time in five years! (For details see page 138.) To celebrate, we begin this issue with another entry in the series that earned him first and second place for 1996, a mystery starring veterinarian detective Dr. David Westbrook.

"I'm thinking of quitting the business," Pete said. "Of getting out."

"Why? I thought you liked your work."

"I used to. You know me, David. I've always been a . . . cautious guy. Being a legal investigator is the perfect job for me. Running background checks, interviewing witnesses. A little excitement, but not too much. I like rubbing elbows with dangerous people without being in danger myself. But lately I feel like I'm losing my edge."

"How do you mean?" I asked.

"I can't seem to concentrate the way I should. I'm like a guy who works on skyscrapers or TV towers who starts to wonder what it would really be like to fly."

"You want to clarify that a little?"

"Okay, a couple of weeks ago we needed a deposition from a crack dealer named Gumpy. He'd been gunned down in a drive-by a few weeks earlier, took six rounds in various parts of his body. When I tracked him down, he was holed up on the third floor of a crack house from hell, homeboys with AK-47s and Uzis in every doorway. I must have been braced ten times on my way upstairs, frisked, my briefcase rifled, the whole drill."

"Some career you picked," I said.

"At least it's never dull. Anyway, when I finally meet Gumpy, he's laid up in a hospital bed. The kind that changes positions electrically? He's got a home-care nurse, and a motorized wheelchair, all installed in this crack house. The place had enough medical gear in it to qualify for Blue Cross."

"Why didn't he just stay in a real hospital?"

"Maybe he was afraid the guys who popped him would be back. Or maybe having a deputy standing guard outside his room cramped his drug deals. In any case, he's in bed, bandaged up like the mummy's curse. So I ask him the questions I need and get the hell out. So far, so good. Except halfway down the stairs,

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I changed my mind and went back up there."

"What for?"

"I honestly don't know. A whim. That's what's scary about it. Anyway, I just said, man, look at yourself. You've got more holes in you than a cheese grater, you're jammed up in this rattrap with guards at every door. You seem like a bright guy, and you must have a few bucks in the bank to afford a setup like this. Maybe you should consider another line of work."

"What did he say?"

"He just looked me over and said, 'You're the one in the wrong job, whiteboy.' And on my way out, it occurred to me that we were both right."

Something in his tone troubled me, and I glanced at him. The dusk was deepening the lines in his face. He was my best friend. And I wondered how well I really knew him anymore. College was a long time ago. "Okay," I said. "Maybe your crack-dealer career counselor had a point. So why not change careers? You're only thirty-something, you've still got the dregs of your youthful looks, and you're rich. What's the problem?"

"Rich?" he echoed.

"Well, you had a trust fund in college, right? What happened to that?"

"Nothing," he said curtly. "Money doesn't go as far as it used to. You, on the other hand, seem to be doing fine. I envy you, David. You've got a neat wife, a lovely home."

"Marrying Yvonne was the luckiest thing I ever did," I said simply. "But what about Jolene? You two have been together quite awhile now, right?"

"Nearly four years. Good years." His mouth narrowed to a thin line. "But Jo and I are coming to the end of things. Marriage isn't in the cards for us."

"I thought you were serious about her."

"Serious is a good word," he said drily. "Things have definitely gotten serious with us. Let it go, David, okay? So, how do you like working up here in the boondocks?"

"Being a small-town vet's no way to get rich."

"You never cared about money anyway," Pete snorted.

"Sure I did. Once. Remember my career as a gambler?"

"Gambler?" Yvonne said, tousling my hair as she joined us on the deck. "I thought I knew most of your vices."

"Gambling wasn't a vice with David," Pete said. "It was a death wish. There were some jocks with room-temperature IQs in our

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dorm who used to play high-stakes poker. David figured since he was brighter than they were, he could clean up."

"Only they knew I didn't have any money," I put in. "They wouldn't let me into the game unless Pete would play too."

"I told him he was crazy," Pete said. "He threatened me with physical violence. Greed does terrible things to a man."

"What happened?" Yvonne asked.

"David was winning big, only he was so busy concentrating on the cards he didn't notice that the thugs we were playing with were getting seriously surly. A couple of them were muttering about cardsharps and getting ready to tear us limb from limb. I tried to break up the game, but they said nobody quits until everybody's broke."

"So Pete claims he's too drunk to play anymore," I continued. "He pushes his stack of chips over to me, hands me his cards, and goes staggering out. The bastard left me to die."

"One of us had to be alive to call 911," Pete countered. "I thought the worst they'd do was break your arms and legs."

"And?" Yvonne asked eagerly. "Did they?"

"Not quite," Pete said. "Your lovin' husband not only got out alive, he kept every cent we'd won."

"But how?"

"I bluffed," I said simply. "My so-called friend here left me no choice. The jocks were still laughing over how drunk Pete was, so I said I was in no better shape, and offered to bet everything I'd won against everything they had left. One of 'em called me a cheat and grabbed my cards. And I had nothing. Pete's hand was a busted flush, I only had a pair of treys. I figured they'd take the bet, clean me out, and let me live. As it was, since they caught me bluffing, I obviously hadn't been cheating. So they let me walk."

"How much did you make that night?" Pete asked.

"Two hundred and fifty-three dollars. A small fortune in those days."

"It's not chump change now," Pete said. "And you're right, leaving you to die or get maimed was a lousy thing to do. Send me a bill for what your life is worth and I'll stick a check in the mail. Anything up to ten bucks."

But I never got the check. Instead, four months later, I got a phone call at my office.

"Dr. Westbrook? Dr. David Westbrook?"

"Speaking. How can I help you?"

"My name's Favio Andretti. I was Peter Boothe's partner."

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"Was?" I said. "Isn't Pete working with you anymore?"

There was a long pause. I could hear static on the line, and suddenly I felt a terrible sensation of vertigo.

"I—I take it you haven't been informed," Andretti said carefully. "I'm sorry, but Peter's dead, Dr. Westbrook. He was killed a few nights ago."

I didn't say anything. Couldn't.

"Dr. Westbrook?"

"I'm here," I said numbly, pulling myself together. "What happened?"

"A mugging went wrong, apparently," Andretti said. "He was found in an alley off the Cass Corridor in Detroit. He'd been shot. Police think it may have been gang related."

"I see," I said, though I didn't. What I really saw was Pete sitting on my deck in the fading light, talking about life, and laughing. "My God. I can't believe . . . I mean, he was just here a few months ago. God. When's the, um, the funeral?"

"Day after tomorrow."

"I'll be there," I said. "Thanks for . . . wait a minute. If you didn't call to tell me what happened, was there something else?"

"As a matter of fact, there is. Pete's will names you as the executor of his estate."

"The what?"

"His executor. You'll have to inventory his property and—never mind. Just come on out to the office after the funeral and I'll run you through the drill."

"But you're a lawyer, aren't you? Why me?"

"You knew Pete. His brother's an attorney, his partner's an attorney, so naturally he'd name a veterinarian as his executor."

"Right," I said. "I guess that does make sense. Knowing Pete." I hung up. I can't remember if I said goodbye.

The funeral was in Highland Park, a section of the Detroit metropolitan area that's almost entirely black now. I skipped the ceremony at the funeral home. I didn't want to see Pete in a silk-lined box with canned organ music in the air. I didn't want to be there at all, really. Especially not alone. But Yvonne was in the fourth month of her pregnancy, and her doctor recommended against the trip.

I hate funerals, hate the terrible communion of grief and loss. I considered skipping it, but Yvonne pointed out that funerals aren't for the dead, they're for the ones who have to go on. And so

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I stood on a knoll on a chilly November afternoon with a cluster of strangers and watched the plain pine box that held my best friend disappear into a hole in the ground.

I couldn't make it compute. The whole scene seemed as surreal as a doper's dream. For one thing, the coffin was really crude, rough planks pegged together like a prop from a Clint Eastwood western. Orthodox Jews are sometimes buried in plain pine boxes, but the Boothes were WASPs. And Pete was probably the only WASP ever buried in this cemetery. The Boothes weren't big rich, but they had money. A grandfather had founded a pharmaceutical company back at the turn of the century and they'd been financially set ever since. I was sure there must be a Boothe family plot somewhere, but Pete had arranged to be buried beside Jolene Greene's family. Okay, he was in love with Jolene, even if they weren't married, and wanted to spend eternity near her. Only he'd have to wait. Jolene wasn't present.

Of the seventy or so people at the graveside, I only recognized a handful, mostly guys I'd been in school with. I couldn't remember many names. We exchanged nods or shook hands. We didn't talk much. We were too damned young for this. And always would be.

Pete's family was there, of course. What there was of it. His brother Arnold looked heavier than I remembered, forty pounds at least. His suit was probably hand-tailored but he was already bulging its buttons. Arnold had never approved of me. I was just Pete's wastrel roommate. Still, he greeted me civilly and invited me to the family home after the services, which surprised me.

I hadn't seen Pete's mom in ten years. She'd always been a striking woman, tall, ash-blond, aristocratic. She'd aged thirty years in the past decade. Her hair was dull gray and her once flawless skin was as roughened and red as though she'd been lashed to a mast in a hurricane and scoured raw by the wind. As always, Pete's younger brother Donnie was at her shoulder. Donnie alone seemed unchanged, his vacant eyes and massive frame unmarked by the years. The aging process seemed to be ignoring him the way most people ignored him. He had to be twenty-seven or -eight, I suppose, but his bland puddin' face didn't look a day over eighteen. Mentally, he'd always be eight or nine.

The person I wanted to see most, Pete's sister Amanda, I only glimpsed. She was there when I arrived, on the far side of the crowd, but when I looked again, she was gone. Which was pretty much the story of our relationship.

After the ceremony, I followed Arnold Boothe's Mercedes to the

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family home in Grosse Pointe, a three-story brick Victorian box on a huge lot with a long, curving drive that led around back to a four-car garage with servant's quarters above it. The house was a few blocks from Lake St. Clair, which probably made it middle class in this neighborhood. Still, the grounds and garden out back were beautifully maintained. Like the house, they reflected a lot of tender care, and radiated an aura of warmth and gentility and safety. Home sweet home.

I'd come home for weekends with Pete a number of times during our college years. It was the poshest place I'd ever seen at the time. His family was always civil enough, though I sensed an undercurrent of disapproval. I was a mongrel kid without kin or connections, studying to be a vet so that I could take care of other people's pets. I didn't exactly fit into their social set. And after I flipped over Amanda and made a sophomoric attempt to woo her, it was clear I'd transgressed a social line. I never felt welcome again.

Nor did I feel particularly welcome now. The long drive was lined with cars and a wake of sorts was obviously in progress, but when I entered, Arnold met me at the door and hustled me off to the den, away from the others. A leper at the feast.

"David," he nodded, shaking my hand. "How have you been?"

"Fine," I said, glancing around. It was a comfortable room, floor to ceiling bookshelves, leather chairs, a fire glowing in the grate. "I'm sorry about Peter—"

"Yes, we all are," he said, cutting me off. "Would you like a drink? Scotch, wasn't it?" I nodded and he filled two tumblers to the brim with Aberlour single malt. He handed me one and slugged down a third of his own with a single gulp. "God, I needed that. What a mess. Typical of Peter."

"How do you mean?"

"To leave things in a shambles. The funeral. Being buried in a colored cemetery, with the services in a colored funeral home. And dragging you all the way down here, of course."

"I was glad to come."

"Well, for the services, yes," Arnold said, sipping his drink, wincing at the bite of it. "But there's no need for you to stay on. I understand you live up north now."

"In Algoma." I nodded. "I have a practice there."

"Which I'm sure you're eager to return to. Bloody inconvenient affairs, funerals. As for Peter's estate, such as it is, I can at least take that burden off your hands. I've taken the liberty of having

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the papers drawn up. You can take them with you and look them over or we can just have them witnessed now."

"What papers?"

"Transferring the executorship to me. The probate court will have to approve it, but that's only a formality."

"That won't be necessary," I said, warming myself at the fire. "I don't mind handling it, and since it was Pete's wish . . ."

"He may have wished it back in college," Arnold said, "but be practical. You no longer live in the area, David. But it's not just a matter of convenience, it's business. I'm an attorney with an established reputation in this town. How will it look if my clients learn that my own brother left his affairs in the hands of a stranger? If the money's a problem, just say so. I'm a reasonable man. Let's work something out."

"What money?"

"The executor's fee, of course. You're entitled to five percent of Peter's estate, plus expenses. I'm afraid it won't amount to much. I took the liberty of running a check on Peter's finances. It didn't take long. He was totally irresponsible when it came to handling money. Absent his stock, which is in trust, I doubt his net worth is more than ten or twelve thousand, which would make your fee less than a thousand. Suppose I up that a bit, let's say . . . an even five thousand?"

"That's very generous," I said, "but it's not necessary. I don't want the money and if Pete's estate is small, it shouldn't take long to clear up. I'll take care of it."

Arnold eyed me over his drink. "All right," he said mildly. "Make me an offer. How much do you want?"

"I don't want anything. Look, you're an attorney, you probably see cases like this every day. It's just another job to you. But your brother was my friend, and he asked me to do this last thing for him. And so I'm going to."

"Very noble," Arnold sneered.

"Not at all," I said tiredly. "Excuse me, I'd better offer my condolences to your mom and hit the road."

"Wait a minute, we're not through talking yet," Arnold said, grabbing my arm. Our eyes met and held a moment, then he looked away. And let go of my arm. "Look, it's a bad day and we're both upset," he muttered. "Let's not be hasty. Stay and talk. Let's work something out. Besides, you haven't finished your drink."

I glanced down at the cut-glass tumbler and the liquid smoke it held. "I think I've had enough," I said, placing the glass on the

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mantel, untasted. "I'm sorry about Peter, Arnie. As for the rest of it, I'll be in touch."

I left him in the den, refilling his glass. The crowd in the living room fell silent when I walked in. They were apparently old family friends, with the accent on old. I didn't know a soul. I offered Peter's mother my sympathy. She accepted graciously, though I doubt she remembered who I was.

Donnie, on the other hand, surprised us both by remembering me. Not my name, of course, he doesn't remember anyone's name, but he remembered that I once gave him a ride on my motorcycle. The memory seemed to brighten his day a little. And mine. He was the only one who noticed when I said my goodbyes and made my escape.

Favio Andretti's office was on Beaubien, a few blocks down from Detroit police headquarters. It was a third-floor walk-up, two rooms and a couple of desks. Andretti was on the phone when I walked in. He waved me to a chair. He was a stumpy man, short, squat, and powerful, with square features and thinning black hair. His tie was askew and his tweed sport coat was draped carelessly over the vinyl sofa against the wall.

He rose and offered his hand. "How are you, Doc? I'm Favio. Pete mentioned you often over the years, mostly about how much trouble you two used to get into. A helluva thing to finally meet like this. You want a drink or something?"

"No, thanks. I've had my limit, actually."

"I skipped the funeral," Andretti said. "I hate the damned things. Besides, they're for the family. Pete and I worked together for almost eight years. I've been to the family digs a few times, but I never really felt comfortable there. I'm second-generation Sicilian, not exactly their kind of people."

"You were Pete's kind, though," I said. "He valued your friendship."

"Yeah, well, he must have," Andretti said, swallowing and misting up. "He sure as hell didn't hang around here for the big bucks. Oh, we made a living. We mostly do legwork for out-of-state law firms, affidavits, depositions, the kind of scutwork they don't want to pay full-time staffers to do. I handle the legal paperwork, Pete did most of the interviews. He was good at it too, had a way with people. They'd tell him the damnedest things." He shook his head, smiling at the memory.

"Is that how he got killed?" I asked carefully. "The work?"

Andretti eyed me quizzically a moment, reading me. "Not

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exactly," he said at last. "He was on a job, but apparently he was just in the wrong place at the wrong time. He finished an interview in a flophouse off the Cass Corridor and got taken off walking back to his car."

"Do the police have anyone in custody?"

"Not yet, but I know the detective who's handling it, a guy named Garcia. He's a good man. He told me he's got a couple guys he likes for it. Nearly half the homicides in this town go unsolved, but I don't think this one will."

"Well, that's something anyway."

"But not much," Andretti said. "Tell me, Doc, when you and Pete talked last, did he seem depressed?"

"He was . . . a little more thoughtful than usual. Why?"

"I don't know, I'm just trying to make sense of what happened. Pete and I were friends. Maybe I feel guilty for not pressing him harder."

"About what?"

"That's just it, I don't know. He got a bad case of the blues last summer, not himself at all. When I asked him about it he blew me off, said it was nothing. But I knew better. So I looked into it. For his own good, you understand."

"What do you mean, looked into it?"

"I asked an investigator I know to check him out."

"And? Did he find anything?"

"Pete was having woman trouble, but not the usual kind. His ladyfriend, Jolene? She had a drug habit. Nothing heavy, mostly tranquilizers. She's a singer and part-time model. Tranqs are like popcorn with that crowd. Problem was, she apparently got pregnant while she was using, miscarried, and nearly died herself."

"My God," I said softly. "I never knew."

"Neither did I," Andretti said. "Pete never said word one to me about it. When I found out, I figured I'd back off, cut him some slack, and let him work his way through it. But he didn't. At least not right away."

"How do you mean?"

"He got pretty flaky. Started keeping odd hours on the job. A week after Jolene got out of the hospital, Pete took off alone for a week to South America. Needed to get away, he said. Well, maybe he did. After he came back he seemed even more down than before. Until he drove up to see you."

"He never mentioned a word about South America to me."

"He wasn't saying much about much at that point. Seeing you

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seemed to settle him down, though. He got back to business and moved back with Jolene. The only odd thing was that he had me draw up a new will for him, and made you his executor."

"You mean this will is new? I assumed it was something left over from college."

"Nope, brand new about ninety days ago. So. You were his friend, what do you think? Did I miss something?"

"I don't know," I said. "Pete was an easy man to like, not so easy to know. Maybe none of us are, really."

"Sad, but true blue," Andretti said, shaking his head grimly. "Anyway, here's the will." He fished a Manila envelope out of his desk and slid it over to me. "It's properly drawn, signed, and witnessed, in case Pete's brother gives you any guff about it. Not that he should. Pete leaves almost everything to dear Arnold."

"Everything?" I said, opening the folder and scanning it. "I never thought they got along very well."

"They didn't," Andretti said. "In fact, they had a major blowout a few months ago about the family stock portfolio. Pete wanted to sell his shares and Arnold was dead set against it. Well, he doesn't have to worry about that anymore. The will divides Pete's shares between Arnold and his mom, about three hundred grand worth. The rest of his estate goes to Jolene, but it doesn't amount to much. Their car and checking and savings accounts were held jointly. He'd blown some money recently, the trip to South America and some other cash withdrawals. There's about seven grand left, all told."

"No insurance?"

"Not that I'm aware of," Andretti said, "and I witnessed most of his legal transactions. Jolene may know more about that, though. There was a key card for a National Bank of Detroit safety deposit box in his effects. The stock certificates are probably there. Is there any reason you can't be bonded?"

"Bonded?"

"Michigan law requires that executors be insured for roughly the amount of the estate. Ever been convicted of a felony or a misdemeanor involving embezzlement?"

"Nope."

"Good. Sign this form at the bottom, I'll notarize it, then take it over to the county courthouse to have it recorded. Do you have a place to stay? I've got a spare room."

"Thanks, but I'm already registered at the Holiday Inn downtown and I know my way around from there."

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"Suit yourself," he said. "If I can help in any way at all, give me a call, okay?" He rose and offered his hand. "I'm sorry we didn't meet years ago, Doc. Good luck."

"Thanks," I said. "For everything."

I took the paperwork to the county courthouse. A bored clerk scanned it, then swore me in, and I officially became Peter Boothe's executor.

I suppose the proper order of business should have been to meet with Jolene next, but I wasn't quite up to it yet. I decided to check the safety deposit box instead.

I went to the NBD branch listed on the card, showed another clerk the executorship paperwork, signed my life away, and then used Pete's card to retrieve his deposit box. A clerk ushered me into a small, well-lit cubicle that contained only a table and four wooden chairs. I placed the box on the table and opened it.

I don't know what I was expecting, family jewelry, or maybe mementos, a christening spoon or a pocket watch. The box held nothing but a stack of personal papers. I began sorting it out.

A frayed manila envelope held a packet of family pictures from his childhood. Pete and Arnie in Little League uniforms, Amanda on a swing looking utterly angelic and heartbreakingly young. There was a shot of his mother and father arm-in-arm in the living room of their Grosse Pointe home. I studied the photo curiously. Pete's father had died of a coronary before I met Pete, and I couldn't recall seeing a photo of him before. He'd been a handsome man. I could see his resemblance to Pete, less so to Arnold. It was a pretty shot, sunlight glowing in the background, framing an attractive couple. Happier times.

I put it back in the envelope with the others, started to set it aside, then hesitated. It was just a packet of family photos. So what was it doing in a safety deposit box? Well, boxes are for valuables, and I suppose the photos were something Pete valued; therefore, here they were. I'd long since given up any hopes of being able to follow Peter Boothe's mental processes. "Pete logic" simply didn't compute for me.

The next folder actually was valuable. It contained five one-thousand-share certificates of Quatermain Pharmaceuticals stock, plus a prospectus and a corporate financial statement. I'm not knowledgeable about the stock market, nor was Pete. The stocks were part of his father's estate and came to Pete as a lifetime trust. The holdings were worth about sixty bucks a share, three

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hundred grand total, and generated an income of roughly twenty grand a year. Pete had always worked, even in college, but the extra twenty thou made him big rich to me. Well, now it would be divided between Arnold and his mother. But not Amanda? Why not? Had they had a falling out? Or was it just more 'Pete logic'?

There was a school folder with "HOW I SPENT MY SUMMER VACATION" printed in block letters on the cover. I flipped it open but it was only photographs, beaches, street scenes. I set it aside.

Next was a nicely engraved folio with Detroit Metropolitan Life on the cover. I opened it, began to scan it, then slowed down and read it more carefully. It was a term life insurance policy, complete with copies of the application and the physical exam Pete had taken to get it. The beneficiaries were Amanda Boothe and Jolene Greene, equally. And the value of the policy seemed to be two and a half million dollars.

I flipped back to the application. Pete had bought the policy in August, roughly four months before. A thousand down, five hundred and twenty-one bucks a month for five years. He'd passed the physical with no problems. It looked like the policy was valid, a done deal.

I leaned back in the chair, trying to make sense of what I was seeing. And for just a moment I was sitting on my own back deck in the afternoon sun, and Pete turned to me and said, "I think I'm losing my edge."

I felt absolutely chilled, as though I'd been drenched with a barrel of ice water. Had he known? Had he tried to tell me? Had he been asking me for help? Did I miss that somehow? And let my best friend down? Let him die?

Sweet Jesus. I massaged my eyes with my fingertips, trying to recall more of our conversation that day. All I could come up with were bits and snippets. A typical talk with Pete, topics changing like light dancing on a pool of quicksilver. Serious talk, about things that mattered, life and love and work, but nothing heavy, nothing ominous. Or at least, not that I remembered.

But Yvonne had been there. It was the first time she and Pete had met and it was important to me that my wife and my friend like each other. Had I been subconciously managing the conversation to avoid touchy subjects? All I could remember clearly was Pete's attitude. There had been an air of . . . melancholy to it. He'd always been mercurial, it was part of his charm, but I couldn't recall seeing him in that particular mood. We'd talked a lot about old times that day and he seemed to remember them fondly. I

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recalled them as a struggle to survive, to get through my classes, get by the exams, get my degree, and get the hell out. At the time, that's how Pete saw it too. Something must have changed to make them look better to him. To give those times a gloss of nostalgia. Something must have gone seriously wrong in his life, and I'd been too full of myself and my own problems even to notice.

Suddenly the figures on the insurance policy blurred, and my eyes were stinging. And for the first time since I'd heard the news, I sat in that tiny, anonymous room and wept for my friend. And for myself. Because my world would be a darker place without him.

A clerk stuck his head in the door. "Is everything all right, sir?"

"Fine," I said, pulling myself together. "Could I have a paper bag, please? I'll be taking this stuff with me."

"A bag, sir?" he said, arching an eyebrow. "As you wish."

I drove directly to the Holiday Inn downtown and checked in, then placed a call to the insurance company and verified that the policy was valid. The agent seemed genuinely distressed about Pete's death, though the prospect of a two-and-a-half-million-dollar payout may have darkened his mood a bit.

I quickly sorted the policy and the stock certificates into a separate envelope and deposited them in the safe in the hall closet. Then I stripped and stepped into the shower. I stood in the spray for a very long time, trying to wash away aches and tear tracks. It didn't work. I was toweling dry when the phone rang.

"Yes?"

"Dr. Westbrook? My name's Garcia. I'm with the Detroit Metro homicide squad. Favio Andretti said you were staying here. Can I come up and talk a minute?"

"I'm not dressed," I said. "Why don't we meet in the coffee shop in the lobby. Ten minutes?"

"Fine. See you there."

"How will I know you?"

"Don't worry, Doc. I'll know you."

The coffee shop was sparsely occupied in the middle of the afternoon. As I entered, a tall, strikingly handsome Latino rose gracefully and waved me over to his booth. His suit looked like an Armani, a perfect fit. On a cop's salary. Ah, Motown.

"Dr. Westbrook, I'm Sergeant Garcia." He showed me his identification. "Sorry to bother you, I know my timing's lousy."

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"No problem," I said, sliding in across from him. "How can I help?"

"I just have a few routine questions. For openers, do you know of anyone who had reason to kill Peter Boothe?"

"No one," I said positively. "He wasn't a man who made enemies."

"I understand you're handling his estate. Is there anything I should know about?"

"I don't think so," I said. "The bulk of it, his stock holdings, goes to his mother and brother, and a life insurance policy will be divided between his sister Amanda and his . . . lady, Jolene Greene."

"How big a policy?" Garcia asked.

I hesitated. "Two and half million," I said.

Garcia smiled ruefully and shook his head. "It's almost like a lotto jackpot, isn't it? What a sorry way to hit it."

"The insurance company didn't seem to think it was out of line."

"It probably isn't," Garcia said with a shrug. "Funny that neither Miss Greene nor Miss Boothe mentioned it, though."

"Maybe they don't know," I said. "Andretti didn't know about it."

"Odd. According to Favio, they were pretty open with each other."

"Let me ask you one, Garcia. Why are you here? I thought this was a street crime."

"We're quite certain it is," Garcia conceded. "In fact, I expect to make a bust by the end of the week. On the other hand, I'm nosy by nature and it never hurts to ask." He rose, glancing at his watch. "Thanks for seeing me. Sorry to hassle you and run, but I have another appointment."

"Will you let me know if anything develops?"

"If you like," he nodded. "Tell me, do you remember a TV show when we were kids called *The Millionaire*? About a guy who gave away a million bucks every week?"

"I think I saw it once. Why do you ask?"

"Because I think you're about to act it out in real life," he said wryly. "Too bad it couldn't be under nicer circumstances. Take care, Dr. Westbrook. Motown's no place to let your guard down."

"So I gather," I said.

Pete's home address was a duplex townhouse in Westland, sandy brick, separate balconies, covered parking. Nice, but not spectacular. I rang the buzzer, waited, then tried again. I was about to give

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up when the door opened. Jolene Greene and I stared at each other for what seemed like a very long time. We'd never met. I'd only seen her in Pete's pictures of her. They didn't do her justice. Barefoot, wearing a lime-green blouse half tucked into a matching skirt, she was tall and willowy as an eland, with high cheekbones, a golden café-au-lait complexion, and dark, hawk's eyes. A bust of Nefertiti come to life. She looked like she hadn't slept in a week and yet somehow it didn't diminish her appeal one whit.

"Do I know you?" she asked at last.

"I'm David Westbrook, Pete's old roommate from college? Can we talk for a minute?"

"Don't feel like talking," she said, turning away. She didn't close the door so I followed her through the living room to the kitchen. Her purse was on the table, with some of its contents spilled beside it. There was an open bottle of Southern Comfort and a single glass. A few yellow pills were scattered loose on the table. She scooped them into a neat pile beside her glass and sat down.

I eyed the pills and the liquor a minute, then took a seat across from her. "Those won't help."

"Sure they will. It'll just take 'em a little longer than usual. You want a drink, help yourself. You want to preach a sermon, Reverend, take your act on the road."

"No sermons," I said, glancing around. The kitchen was bright and airy, the table and cabinets were golden oak, the real thing, handcrafted. It must have been a happy room. Once. "Look, I know this is a bad time—"

"Damned straight it's a bad time," she said, cutting me off. "And you don't want a drink and I don't want to talk. So say your say and say goodbye, okay?"

"All right." I shrugged. "Pete made me the executor of his estate. The apartment, the car, and the bank accounts are yours now, free and clear. Are there any other effects of his I should see? Papers, insurance policies, anything like that?"

She eyed me a moment, then shook her head, carefully, as though it were loosely attached. "Not here," she said. "Not anymore. He kept things in a shoebox in the bedroom closet. Took it with him when he moved out. I haven't seen it since."

"He moved out?"

"I kicked him out. Right after I got out of the hospital. I blamed him for what happened. I lost my baby. And the rest of me. I had a hysterectomy. Did he tell you that?"

I shook my head.

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"It wasn't so bad," she said grimly. "I'm tougher than I look. And it must've eased Mama Boothe some. She didn't have to worry about any little beige Boothe babies shockin' the relatives at family reunions."

"I doubt she felt like that," I said.

"Then you don't know her very well, do you? Anyway, Pete moved back home to Mama. It was probably best. We weren't much good for each other at the time. He took the box with him when he left. I don't recall seeing it after he moved back. He said something about a safety deposit box once. Maybe that's where it is."

"Do you remember what was in it?"

"Papers," she sighed. "Some stocks, old pictures, stuff like that." She picked up one of the yellow pills, examined it a moment like a grape at a supermarket, then popped it in her mouth and washed it down with a sip of Comfort.

"What are those?" I asked, gesturing at the handful of pills beside her purse.

"You don't know? I thought you were a doctor."

"I'm a vet. An animal doctor."

"They're quarries," she said. "Quaranes. Mellow yellows. Try one. They're harmless. No side effects. Unless you happen to be pregnant. Then there are a few side effects. Internal bleeding, fetal anoxia. In the end they had to abort my daughter and gut me like a trout. But on the upside, I don't have to worry about that particular side effect. Not anymore."

"I'm sorry," I said. "I truly am."

She stared at me a moment, then slowly shook her head. "No. I'm the one who's sorry. None of this is your fault, and I know Pete cared about you. He talked about you a lot, especially lately. Like he was trying to remember happier times, you know? So what do you want from me, Doc? How can I help you?"

"I should be asking you that," I said.

"I don't need help. I'm fine."

"You don't look fine to me."

"I'm not a horse and you're not my doctor. Was there anything else?"

"Just one thing," I said. "Pete was acting . . . well, he wasn't himself the last time I saw him. I'd like to know why. Andretti said he went to South America, but Pete never mentioned it. What was that about?"

"I honestly don't know. He went there after I kicked him out. He

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said it was a vacation, but I don't see how it could've been. He was only gone a week, hit about five countries, and it's not exactly Disney World down there, you know? But Pete said it was great. Even talked about moving there. Living was cheap, we could toast on the beaches and run in the surf. Even the drugs were cheap. Good stuff, too. Brand names. Like the junk that killed our daughter. It was the ugliest thing he ever said to me. He never mentioned it again. Just as well."

"Still," I said, "I can see how he might have . . . blamed you a little for what happened. You were popping yellows then, right? And you still are."

"Blamed me?" she said, surprised. "For these?" She picked up a fistful of pills. "You must be a horse doctor. You really don't know what they are, do you?"

"Quaranes?" I said. "They're tranquilizers, right?"

"Right. But do you know who makes them? Quatermain Pharmaceuticals, a big German drug company. But they didn't develop them. They bought the manufacturing rights twenty years ago from a small American company. Boothe Pharmaceuticals, Pete's family firm. It's almost poetic, isn't it?"

Her eyes were brimming, but there was so much rage in her gaze that I couldn't face her. I looked away. "My God," someone said. Me, I guess.

"So you see, Pete didn't blame me for losing our baby," she said after a while. "Or at least he didn't blame me alone. Considering what happened, if he was acting a little crazy the past few months, maybe he was entitled to."

"Yeah," I said, "I guess he was." I rose slowly, feeling a hundred years older than when I'd arrived. "Look, I know it doesn't mean much, but I can't tell you how sorry I am about everything. If I can help . . ."

"All you can do for me is leave me be. It's easier to handle alone. And I'd better get used to it. You know where the door is."

I nodded. I reached out to touch her shoulder, but she turned away. I was halfway to the front door before I remembered. "Jolene," I said, retracing my steps, "there was an insurance policy in Pete's safety deposit box. Did he tell you about it?"

She shook her head numbly.

"It's quite substantial, and you and Amanda are the beneficiaries. Your share will be a million and a quarter. It'll take ten days or so to process the paperwork. They'll contact you." She didn't

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react. Her dark eyes were molten but her face was as wooden as a tribal mask. I could read nothing in it.

I let myself out and stood on the stoop a minute to catch my breath and gather my thoughts. *The Millionaire*. Right. No wonder the show was canceled. As I started down the steps, I heard an odd sound. It sounded like a dog yowling somewhere in the building. But I'm a vet. I've heard a lot of howls. This was a wail of pure animal anguish, but it wasn't a dog at all.

Amanda Boothe had an apartment in the older section of Eastpointe, née East Detroit. The house was a huge old saltbox, circa World War I, subdivided into flats. I rang the doorbell marked Boothe/Pearson, and someone buzzed me in. Amanda was waiting on the landing at the head of the stairs, looking as blond and slender and angelic as I remembered. She was a few years older perhaps, but wore it well. I was so busy basking in her welcoming smile that I was halfway up the stairs before I realized she was holding herself upright with a pair of Loftstrand crutches, aluminum canes with wrist braces.

The surprise must have registered on my face. She grinned wryly and shook her head. "I knew it," she said. "I knew exactly how you'd react. That's why I made Pete promise he wouldn't tell you."

"But . . . what happened?" I asked, taking her shoulders and giving her a peck on the cheek.

"A fall," she said, leading me into her apartment. "I was waterskiing in Florida a few years ago and got tangled with a submerged stump. Actually, I'm doing pretty well now. I can walk with a little help from my friends here, though it's still easier to get around in my chair." She lowered herself into a black canvas wheelchair with a frame of anodized aluminum.

"How about you? Pete told me you finally got married."

I nodded, trying not to stare at her legs and the wheelchair. I forced myself to glance around the room instead. The living room was sunny and bright, with bone berber carpeting, creamy walls, freshly painted, and Queen Anne furniture, delicate as china, all arcs and curves.

"And?" Amanda prodded. "Are you happy? What's she like?"

"She's terrific. Her name was Yvonne LeClair and she's your diametric opposite, dark and, um, not slender. And conning her into marrying me was the luckiest thing I've ever done."

"Second luckiest," she said, shaking her head. "My turning you

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down was first. We're an unlucky clan, David. Look at us. Arnold's stuffy as a Victorian closet, mom will be saddled with Donnie until she dies and then it'll be my turn. Pete was our best hope, our last candle in the wind. Out. Just like that." She snapped her fingers with finality.

"Actually, I've been getting the impression that he'd been having some pretty serious problems, too."

"You mean Jolene losing their baby? Yeah, that was rough. Pete even moved home for a while after that. But it didn't work out."

"Why not?"

"I don't know. He was pretty unsettled at the time. He took off for South America for a week and afterwards he and mom had a major blowout."

"What about?"

"Neither one would say, but it must have been pretty grim. It even got physical. Donnie went after Pete with a shovel and banged him up. He didn't mean it, of course, he was crying two seconds later begging Pete to forgive him. Donnie's always been protective of my mom, but I never dreamed he'd try to hurt Pete."

"He must have been pretty upset."

"Seems like he gets upset a lot more easily lately. Maybe he's getting to be too much for Mom to handle. She's a great lady, my mom. She's been a saint with Donnie. But she's got flaws, too. She never liked Jolene, probably because she's black, and she still thinks this wheelchair is a phase I'm going through, like hula hoops or Beatlemania. That I could get out of it if I wanted to badly enough."

"Maybe you will. They're doing great things nowadays."

"I'll survive even if they don't. When they told me I'd never tango again, I went into a tunnel so black I thought I'd never crawl out. But I did. And I managed to whack together a new life for myself out of the pieces of the old one. I survived. And I'm not going back into that tunnel again. Not even for Pete. Does that seem cold to you?"

"No. Just honest, and you always were. Pete would have wanted you to keep pushing."

"I'm not so sure. The last six months, it was like I hardly knew him anymore. He'd come over here half loaded and say he needed to talk. But he wouldn't talk. He'd just stare off into space, a thousand miles away. When I asked him he'd say he was dreaming about South America, especially Paraguay. What a great place it

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was, great beaches, cheap living. He said I ought to see it sometime, that I'd love it there."

"Maybe you can, if you like. Pete left you some money from an insurance policy. It'll take a week or so to process—"

"Insurance?" she said, cutting me off. "What kind of insurance?"

"Life insurance," I said. "A two-and-a-half-million-dollar policy, divided equally between you and Jolene."

She looked away for a moment, and when she turned back her face had gone gray. "When did he get the policy?"

"About four months ago. Why?"

"That would have been about the time he and Jolene were having all the problems," she said grimly. "What about Pete's stock?"

"He divided it equally between Arnold and your mother."

"Arnie? But why? Pete and Arnie never got along, and after Pete's blowup with Mom, they were barely speaking. Why would he leave his stock to them?"

"I don't know," I said. "His will doesn't explain anything, it just expresses his wishes."

"But it doesn't make sense. Look, Pete never bothered with insurance. We didn't need it. You see, none of us can sell our Quatermain stock. The shares are locked up in a lifetime trust, nontransferable. It was an arrangement my dad made when he sold the company to the Germans. He wanted to guarantee us an income without taking any chance that we'd blow it. So Pete and I made a deal. Whichever one went first would leave our stock to the other, and we'd look out for each other's loved ones. We figured it was all the insurance we'd need. Why would he break his promise to me?"

"I don't know, Amanda. After what he'd been through this past year, I'm amazed he was rational at all. Maybe he was more aware of how . . . fragile life is because of what happened to Jolene, so he arranged things so you'd be okay if anything happened."

"What are you saying? That he was suddenly psychic? That he sensed something was coming?"

"I don't know what to think. He visited me a month after all this happened and we had some pretty heavy conversations, but he didn't mention any of this, not the insurance or the lost baby or even South America. Maybe he'd been down that tunnel you mentioned and was working through it."

"No," she said quietly, "I don't think so. This is all too strange. I

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think he went into that tunnel and never came out. And now he never will."

We stared at each other in silence. A cellular phone gurgled softly in a pocket of Amanda's chair. She lifted it to her ear. "Yes?" She listened a moment, then nodded. "I see. That's good news, Sergeant. Thanks for letting me know." She rang off and replaced the phone. "That was Garcia," she said numbly. "He's arrested the guys who killed Pete. Three teenybop gang bangers from the Corridor. A random street crime. I think I'd like to be alone now, David. It was good to see you." She turned and wheeled herself into another room. And out of my life. Somehow I knew I wouldn't see her again. Maybe Pete wasn't the only one who was psychic.

I went back to the Holiday Inn, but the thought of spending the night there was too damned grim. I decided to pack, grab a quick bite, and then head home. I'd done as much as I could and I wanted to be away from Pete's city and its pain. I wanted my own bed. I wanted to hold Yvonne and tell her everything was okay. And even if she knew I was lying, she'd let it pass. Sometimes lies become true that way.

I packed my bags, then trotted downstairs to the hotel restaurant, found an empty table in the corner, and ordered a BLT and coffee, and a double coffee to go. A moment later, Sergeant Garcia walked in, scanned the room, and made his way to my table.

"Doc, glad I caught you. I checked at the desk and they said you might be here. Can I join you for a minute?"

"Please, sit down. Can I buy you dinner? I think you've earned it."

"No, thank you, I'm on my way home. And I'm not sure I earned very much. The schmucks tried to peddle Pete's credit cards. Master criminals they ain't."

"Then you're sure you have the right people?"

"Positive. They had his wallet, his watch, and one punk's already cut a deal to roll on his buddies. They did it all right. Why do you ask?"

"I don't know. I've been hearing some odd things today about Pete."

"Like what?" Garcia was eyeing me curiously.

"Only that he's been going through a rough patch. It doesn't matter now."

"No," Garcia agreed. "I guess not. But there are a couple of points about this case that bother me, too. Maybe you can help me

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out. The family's already circled the wagons, you know? All I get from them is Saint Peter Boothe."

"He really was a terrific guy," I said.

"I'm not saying he wasn't. And I'm sure as hell not looking to help the punks who took him off. I just want a few answers, for my own peace of mind, okay? Just between us?"

"Ask away," I said.

"You were his friend, right? Knew him pretty well?"

"We were friends. I'm not sure how well I knew him."

"Do you know if he was into street drugs at all? Like crack? Or cocaine maybe?"

"Not a chance," I said.

"What about his ladyfriend, Jolene. Rumor has it she's a pill popper. Would he try to score for her?"

"Again, no chance. They'd already had a major blowup about drugs. There's no way he'd help her get them. Why?"

Garcia sighed. "I'm just trying to make sense of the setup. Boothe was down on the Corridor to talk to a witness, a guy named Washington. Wash lives in a flophouse on Montcalm. There were plenty of empty parking spots out front, it's not like the area gets much traffic, you know? But Boothe didn't park in front. He parked three blocks over, on Ligett. That's a rough area at night and Pete must've known that. So why make the walk? Unless maybe he was trolling for drugs, looking to score?"

"No way. None at all."

"Okay, maybe not. Do you know if he was ill? Epileptic, anything like that?"

"He couldn't have been," I said. "He passed an insurance physical a few months ago. Why? What are you getting at?"

"I don't know, that's what bugs me. Boothe's autopsy bloodwork didn't turn up a damned thing, no drugs, no booze, nothing. But the three punks that killed him said he was stoned to the bone. That's why they decided to take him. He was staggering, so drunk he could hardly walk."

I didn't say anything for a moment. It was as though time had ground to a halt. "This . . . Washington?" I said at last. "The guy Pete interviewed? What did he say?"

"That Boothe was fine when he left. Sober as a judge. Any ideas, Doc?"

"No," I said. "Sorry."

Something in my tone must have given me away. He glanced up at me, reading me openly. He knew I was lying. He listened to lies

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for a living. But apparently he decided not to call me on it. He rose, curtly wished me luck, and stalked out. My dinner arrived a moment later. I left it on the table.

I walked slowly up to my room in a mood as dark as Amanda's tunnel. My memory kept flickering back to that poker night in college when Pete pulled his drunk act, staggered out, and left me behind. To play out his hand. And my imagination countered with a second image, of Pete staggering along the Cass Corridor late at night. Setting himself up? But why?

I picked up my suitcase, flopped it on the bed, and opened it. I found the accordion folder that held the contents of Pete's safety deposit box, emptied it onto the dresser, and switched on the overhead light.

I set aside the envelope of family pictures, the stock certificates, and the insurance policy. The answer wouldn't be there.

The folder with "HOW I SPENT MY SUMMER VACATION" printed on the cover was next. I flipped it open and glanced through it. Ordinary vacation photographs, beaches, street scenes.

The beach shots looked typically touristy, sunbathers and swimmers. The street scenes, though, were nondescript. Traffic, pedestrians. But they all had street signs in the shot, in Spanish. Each shot was identified by country with a scrawled abbreviation below it. I checked the dates on the edges of the photos. They corresponded to Pete's August vacation.

So what was the folder doing in the safety deposit box? I finished flipping through the pages, and found something I'd missed earlier. His canceled plane ticket. Some vacation. He'd spent one day each in Panama, Ecuador, Peru, Bolivia, Paraguay, and finished in Argentina. Wrong, not one day each. He spent two days in Paraguay. Whoopee.

What on earth had he been doing down there? After the death of his child, he must have been at one of the lowest points in his life. Maybe running away made a kind of sense. But to do a lightning tour of second-rate South American beaches?

No, not beaches. He'd said something to Jolene about . . . Paraguay. About what a great place it was. Great beaches. And good dope. Something about that had bothered me when she said it, but I'd let it pass. Beaches. There were beaches in Ecuador and Peru and Argentina. But none in Paraguay. The country's landlocked, right?

Sarcasm? And the crack about good dope? The real thing. The junk that had killed their daughter. The cruelest thing he'd ever said to me, Jolene said. The real thing? Quaranes?

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I opened the packet that held the Quatermain Pharmaceutical stocks and found the prospectus. I flipped through it to the section on foreign sales, and there it was. Pete's itinerary. Quatermain had sales operations in each of the countries he'd visited. So? Quatermain was a German conglomerate, they had branches all over the world, including most of the countries of South America. At a glance, it looked like they did a fair amount of business there; the sales figures accounted for half of the corporation's gross, with each of the countries contributing its fair share—including Paraguay.

I rechecked the street scenes in the photos. Each shot had focused on a street sign, but in the background, each had a Quatermain Corporación building. All looked substantial but one. The shot of the street in Nueve Bavaria, Paraguay, was a row of ramshackle storefronts. Quatermain headquarters was the size of a mom-and-pop bodega. A mail drop, nothing more. I double-checked the prospectus. The street address was correct, it was the only Quatermain address in Paraguay. And according to the prospectus, corporate sales for Paraguay were roughly equal to those from Argentina.

I was a little rusty on my geography, so I made a quick call to the information desk of the Detroit Public Library. Argentina is roughly eight times larger than Paraguay, in size and population.

Pete logic and Pete humor. There are no beaches in Paraguay. And there was no Quatermain Pharmaceuticals operation there either. At least no legitimate one. The corporation was dumping drugs in Paraguay, but they weren't being used there. A lot of the stuff was being shipped north. All the way to Detroit.

And Pete had walked off and left me to play his cards for him again. Maybe because in college I'd been lucky and I'd won. But I couldn't see any way of winning this game. No way at all.

It was nearly nine when I arrived at the Boothe home in Grosse Pointe. The house was brightly lit and the long driveway was still lined with cars. It was raining, so I kept my Jeep to a crawl and double-parked near the front door. I blocked some people in, but I wasn't concerned about it. I didn't expect to stay long.

Arnold answered the bell. He was in a vest and shirtsleeves, with his tie loosened. In fact, he seemed pretty loose generally. I guessed the tumbler of scotch in his hand wasn't his second. Or even his fourth.

"Sorry to bother you again," I said. "I'd like to talk to you, and to your mother. Privately. It's about Pete's estate."

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He glowered blearily a moment, then shrugged. "Come in." He showed me into the den again, then left to fetch his mother. I stood at the French doors, staring out into the dark. The drizzle was increasing. The end of a perfect day. A few minutes later Arnold returned with Mrs. Boothe and Donnie in tow. Mrs. Boothe looked tired, but there was a grim set to her mouth. Perhaps she'd been expecting me. She took a chair by the fire, with Donnie at her shoulder just behind her chair. Arnold walked unsteadily to the bar to freshen his drink.

"I'll have to ask you to be brief, Dr. Westbrook," Mrs. Boothe said. "We have guests. This isn't the proper time for . . . . business."

"It's the only time I have," I said. "I'm leaving tonight, and I have a big problem. Pete left me with a decision to make, one he couldn't make himself. You see, he's willed his shares of the Quatermain stock to the two of you, equally. But he also left enough clues behind to point me to an ugly truth. One that affects you both."

"What truth?" Mrs. Boothe asked.

"That the Quatermain Corporation is dumping massive quantities of drugs, mostly Quaranes, in South American markets. Those drugs are being funneled back into this country. They're as easy to get as popcorn."

"And no more dangerous," Arnold protested. "I've used them myself. By prescription, of course."

"But most of them are being sold illegally. And when a pregnant woman takes them, as Jolene Greene did, the results can be disastrous, both to the fetus and to the mother."

"You can hardly hold a corporation or its shareholders culpable for the actions of a few drug addicts," Mrs. Boothe said coolly.

"I didn't come here to debate morality with you, Mrs. Boothe. I just wanted to tell you something, and ask you something. For openers, I don't believe Pete's death was a random crime. I think he meant it to happen. Not suicide, exactly, more like Russian roulette. He put himself in harm's way by arranging his schedule to be in rough parts of town at night, and then he invited an attack by pretending to be a drunk."

"That's nonsense," Arnold said. "Pete was immature, but he wasn't crazy."

"No, but he was in a terrible jam," I said. "The death of his daughter set him off on a search for answers, but when he found them, he realized he couldn't blow the whistle on Quatermain without bankrupting his entire family. So he found a way to

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resolve it. He bought a small fortune in life insurance for Amanda and Jolene. It wouldn't pay off for suicide, of course, so he found a way around that too."

"I don't believe you," Mrs. Boothe said coldly. "Peter would never have done such a thing. He hadn't the . . ."

"Courage?" I said. "Maybe not. The Pete I grew up with wasn't particularly brave. But that was a long time ago. Perhaps the death of his daughter and the . . . maiming of his lover changed that. But it wouldn't explain the way he rearranged his will. So I have to ask you something. After Pete's 'vacation' in South America, did he tell you about Quatermain and the drugs? And ask you what he should do?"

Neither of them answered me for a moment. They glanced at each other instead. And that glance was all the answer I needed. "Thank you for your time," I said, turning to leave.

"Wait a minute," Arnold snapped. "Where are you going? What are you going to do?"

"I don't know," I said honestly. "Play out the hand, I guess."

"You mean make these ridiculous charges public? And reduce our family to poverty?" Mrs. Boothe said. "Surely Peter wouldn't have wanted that."

"No, he didn't," I said. "But it's not his problem now. He left it to me. I'll have to work it out on my own. And frankly, it doesn't pose the same dilemma for me that it did for him. Goodbye, Mrs. Boothe, and again, my condolences."

"Wait, please," Arnold pleaded, but I closed the door behind me, cutting him off. I could hear them arguing fiercely as I made my way out. I paused on the porch. The rain was a torrential downpour now. I turned up my collar and ran to my Jeep.

I motored slowly down the drive, squinting into the streaming darkness. I was halfway to the street when I glimpsed a figure off to my left, running through the rain. It was Donnie. His black suit was drenched and his hair was plastered against his skull. And he was carrying a shovel.

He was trying to cut me off at the gate. It was a suicidal move. Even if he made it, he'd have to step aside to avoid being run down. Unless I got there first. If I could beat him to the gate, I could get out on the street and be gone before anyone got hurt.

I matted the gas pedal and the Jeep surged forward, charging toward the gate like a crazed buffalo. But he was faster than I thought. He made it to the gate first and wheeled to face me, blocking my path. And by the crazed look in his eyes in the head-

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light glare I could see he wasn't going to move. His mother had told him to stop me, and he meant to do it. Or die trying.

I was too close and the driveway was too slick. If I swerved to avoid him I'd ram the concrete gateposts that flanked him. I had to hit him. No choice. I had to. I even tried to, I think. But I didn't.

At the last second I cramped the wheel hard right, sending the Jeep into a full-blown skid. It bucked, started to flip, and then slammed broadside into the gatepost, driver's side first.

The world exploded into a welter of shattered glass and torn metal, and then winked out as my head banged off the door.

Something was in my face, smothering me. I tried to brush it off and it gave way. The airbag. The airbag had gone off.

I was dazed, my nose was bleeding, maybe broken. And then Donnie was beside me, raising his shovel to finish me off. And I was too groggy to move. Trapped in my seat by the airbag and my safety belt, I couldn't even avoid the blow. I closed my eyes . . .

And there was light. A glare on my closed eyeslids. And I could hear sirens. And road noise. I opened my eyes. Donnie was gone. A woman was kneeling beside me, wiping blood from my face. She was wearing some kind of a blue uniform. Her face was squarish and her blond hair was cut very short. I blinked, trying to take in my surroundings. Ambulance. I was in an ambulance.

"Where's Donnie?" I asked.

"Who's Donnie? You were alone in the car." She stared into my eyes, checking my pupils for dilation.

"Donnie was . . . outside. With a shovel."

"You mean the mentally handicapped guy? He's okay. You're lucky he was there. He pried your door open with his shovel. He said you gave him a ride on your motorcycle once."

"Once," I agreed. "Long time ago."

"You'd better save your strength. You've got a nasty gash on your forehead, maybe a concussion. You rest now; we'll be at the hospital in a few minutes."

"Right," I said, sagging back against the pillow. The glare from the overhead light was irritating so I closed my eyes again. And after a while the thrum of the engine became the thunder of waves. And I could feel the sunlight on my face. And I saw Pete off in the distance, loping through the foamy breakers, leaving me behind.

I tried to call his name, but I had no voice. And so I put my head down and ran after him, pounding desperately through the surf, chasing my best friend down the golden, glistening beaches of Paraguay. ●

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EXILE

by Ralph McInerny

"There's mail for you," Laura said.

"Why do you keep it?"

"It's not only junk mail, Matt. I can't just throw it out."

"A federal offense?"

The phone from which he was calling was one in a row just behind a moving walkway at O'Hare. Outside an angry sky was visible, November clouds gathering like a seasonal curse. He half expected Laura to tell him precisely what statute prevented her from getting rid of the mail that continued to arrive for him at the address that had been their parents' home, in the town he had left fifteen years before.

"Where should I send it?"

"I give you permission to throw it out."

"Not the letters."

He wanted to ask her who the letters were from, but even these infrequent calls home were a sign of weakness. The past and the self he had been were no more; he had repudiated them. He had written a record of failure he was determined to forget. In favor of what? That was still unclear.

"Okay, send them."

"Where?"

"Chicago."

"Matt, come home. If you're that close, come home."

"I'm at the airport."

"Coming or going?"

He laughed. "Good question."

Ralph McInerny's stories and books are usually set in the Midwest, from whence he hails, and where he has made a distinguished career as an academic. For the start of an entirely new series of novels set in Indiana, at the university where Dr. McInerny teaches, Notre Dame, see *Upon This Rockne* (Fall / St. Martin's Press). ¶

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Laughing had been a mistake. How he longed to see his sister and talk and kid around with her as they used to do. They had been so close.

"Come home."

He felt a delicious sadness at those words. His eyes filled with tears and the passing travelers began to blur. He turned back to the rain-filled clouds. "I wish I could."

"I'll hold your mail."

"Is there anything important?"

"The only thing I opened was to both of us. There's going to be a class reunion."

Laura was a year younger than he was and twice as smart, which was why they had been in the same class. Now she was a lawyer and he was . . .

She was reading the notice of the reunion to him. It sounded as if it had been written years ago, full of the rah-rah stuff he could never stand and pathetic tries at humor. The chairman of the committee was Robert M. McGinnis, Jr. Laura pronounced the name as if it were just any name.

"Are you going?"

"Of course!"

"Say hello to Robert M. McGinnis, Jr. for me."

"Matt!"

He took the receiver from his ear and hung it up but her voice echoed in his ear, drowning out the high hum of the terminal. Signs directed him on the long walk to where he could pick up the bag he had checked through when he left Dallas. Laura continued to call after him as he wended through the other travelers. There was no pattern in the flow, everyone seemed on a collision course. He walked as if he were about to throw a block and a path cleared for him.

An escalator took him down to the lower level where he found the carousel on which the bags from his flight had arrived. It was empty. The other passengers had come and gone. How long had he been on the phone to Laura?

He had made the call on impulse, betting that she wouldn't answer, and after listening to it ring for a few times he could go on to baggage pickup. Napping on the flight, he had dreamed of calling her. It had been months since they had talked, but she was always there, he could count on that. She had stood by him when even their parents wrote him off.

His big mistake had been confessing. If he hadn't gone down to

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the sheriff's office and told old Berwyn that he had committed murder, everything would have been different.

"Yeah?" Sheriff Berwyn said.

"I mean it."

Berwyn worked his cigar from one corner of his mouth to the other, his little eyes studying Matt.

"Get out of here."

"I killed someone!"

"Come back in the morning with your parents."

"Arrest me."

"For what?"

Matt threw himself into the chair that faced Berwyn's desk. "I told you."

"Where's the body?"

"In Lake Beulah."

"Uh huh. Whose body is it?"

"Junior McGinnis."

Berwyn sat in silence for a minute, chewing on his cigar. Fuller, his deputy, looked in from another room.

"Call the McGinnises, Jack."

"Why?"

"Ask them if their boy is there. Junior."

"It's Halloween, Sheriff."

"Ask them where he is then."

It was ten-thirty. Matt had not even noticed the clock on the wall until then. Berwyn had not reacted as he expected, thinking he was playing a trick on him, but that call would convince him that what Matt had told him was true. It seemed important to notice the time at which he would be acknowledged as a murderer. Only he preferred to think of himself as an executioner.

"Mrs. McGinnis?" Jack Fuller said. "This is Deputy Fuller, at the sheriff's office?"

They all seemed to be waiting to learn if Mrs. McGinnis would recognize who the deputy was. But of course she thought it was a trick. Finally, Berwyn took the phone.

"Mrs. McGinnis, this is Sheriff Berwyn, I mean it and this is no joke. Is your son there?"

Matt could hear the excited voice of Junior's mother and for the first time he realized the pain what he had done would cause her.

"No, he hasn't done anything that I know of. Where is he?"

He nodded through the answer Matt did not need to hear. He knew where Junior McGinnis had gone. Berwyn spoke soothingly to

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Mrs. McGinnis, hung up the phone, and said to Fuller, "Go check out the dance at the school and see if Junior McGinnis is there."

"She say what he was wearing?"

"What the hell difference does it make what he's wearing."

"They're in costumes. It's Halloween."

Matt said, getting it on the record, "He's wearing a Nixon mask, and he's on the bottom of Lake Beulah."

Fuller paused and frowned at Matt but Berwyn sent him on his way. They sat in silence, the two of them, Matt and Sheriff Berwyn. Matt had said all he had to say and the sheriff had heard all he cared to hear.

As he waited, Matt imagined rising to speak at the trial. A speech formed in his imagination, vague, but it was the effect rather than the words he spoke that he dwelt on. He had avenged his sister's honor. Junior McGinnis had told Tom Scheller and Don Conroy that he had taken Laura out to Lake Beulah one night last summer and they had done it on a blanket in the moonlight. Twice. The twice was the impressive thing, and Matt, overhearing his two classmates, had seen their expressions of wondrous envy.

"Do you believe him?" Don asked Tom.

"He's got her panties in his glove compartment."

It was worse than being made fun of himself, to hear his sister spoken of that way. The first thing Matt did was to check the glove compartment in Junior McGinnis's car. There was a pair of panties pushed back among the maps and flashlight and other junk.

Matt imagined Laura swelling with child, an object of scorn and snickering. But he could not bring himself to talk to her about it. What he would do was avenge her. And that is what he had done.

He had parked up the street from the McGinnises' and seen Junior go out to his car. When he was behind the wheel Junior pulled the rubbery Nixon mask over his head. When he waylaid Junior later that mask seemed to absorb the force of the tire jack that Matt brought down on his head. He pushed Junior into the backseat of his car and drove him to Lake Beulah. He put the body into the rowboat he had pulled up on the ground just north of the beach and pushed off. He left the mask on Junior. As he rowed out onto the lake, the face of the disgraced president stared solemnly up at him. He pulled the panties over the masked head. That was better. When he was far enough offshore, Matt eased the body over the side and in a moment it was gone. Rowing back to shore, he could almost believe he had imagined what he had done.

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The phone on Sheriff Berwyn's desk rang and he let it ring twice before he picked it up. He said his name and listened. When he spoke it was to Matt.

"Get out of here."

"What do you mean?"

"The McGinnis kid is at the dance."

"He can't be! I killed him. I hit him over the head and dumped him into Lake Beulah."

"Damn it, the joke's over. Jack made him take off his mask to make sure."

"What kind of a mask?"

Berwyn put the question to the phone: "What kind of a mask?"

"A Nixon mask."

Matt went to the dance to see for himself and there was a boy in a Nixon mask, dancing with Laura. He didn't go in. He walked out to the parking lot where the sound of whispering came from some of the cars. Imagining what was going on there in the dark, he found Junior's car and let the air out of two of the tires. He felt that Laura had betrayed him. He should have left the panties in the glove compartment. He couldn't find Tom Scheller's car or he would have let the air out of his tires too.

The following day Tom Scheller was reported missing and for several weeks there was consternation and confusion as everyone tried to figure out why a football star would disappear in the midst of a winning season. Don Conroy wondered if a rival team had kidnapped him, a remark so dumb that things quieted down.

The body wasn't found until spring, when Lake Beulah melted. Matt waited for the sheriff to come for him, but he didn't. Could that mask have worked itself free? It was a closed-casket affair. Highet, the undertaker, was surprised by Matt's question.

"How did you know a thing like that?"

"He was wearing it the night he disappeared."

"A mask?"

"It was Halloween."

Highet told Berwyn, and finally the sheriff came. For the second time, Matt confessed.

"The mask doesn't prove anything."

"How would I know he was wearing it?"

"You saw him at the dance. I don't know. Other kids were wearing Nixon masks."

"One other. Were the panties still pulled over the mask?"

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Berwyn stopped chewing his cigar.

"Tell me how you did it."

Matt remembered that night as if it were yesterday. Berwyn lit his cigar and listened closely. It got into the paper and Matt told the reporter everything. His parents were devastated.

"You deserve whatever they do to you," his father said. It was the last thing he ever said to Matt.

His mother said she didn't believe it but his father convinced her. Only Laura stuck with him.

"Why?" she asked.

"I thought he was Junior."

"Junior!"

"He said things about you."

"What things?"

"You know."

"I don't know! What things?"

He couldn't say it. He looked at Laura and felt like crying, not because of what he had done to Tom Scheller but because of what she had done with Junior McGinnis.

He wasn't arrested. The only thing the prosecutor had to work with was Matt's confession. That wasn't enough.

"I don't think you did it anyway," Purcell, the district attorney, said. His red hair had lost its color and his skin was pale. He should have worn a mask.

"Why not?"

Because the panties he had pulled over what turned out to be Tom Scheller's head had never been worn. They were new. They had been bought at K Mart and a kid in a checkout line remembered Junior buying them.

"He said he had to replace a pair," the kid said.

"What does that mean?"

"Ask him."

Berwyn asked Junior McGinnis, who had no explanation of how a pair of panties he had bought as a joke had ended up on the drowned body of Tom Scheller.

"What kind of a joke?"

Matt was sitting at the back of the court when that question was put to Junior by Purcell. Would Junior tell the prosecutor what he had told Tom Scheller and Don Conroy? Would he shame Laura before the whole town? Junior looked at the defense table where

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the hotshot lawyer from Chicago brought in by the McGinnises to defend their son looked on as if none of this had the least importance.

"It was our fraternity. You had to prove you had, you know . . ."

Even Purcell laughed at that. But order was restored and the prosecutor sobered up.

"How did that undergarment end up on the drowned body of Tom Scheller?"

"I gave it to him."

"You gave it to him!"

"He was president of our fraternity."

The lie had the ring of truth. But who other than Matt would know it was a lie? Maybe Junior had intended to turn those panties over to Tom. Maybe he had hoped to earn a pair that Halloween night. Matt no longer cared.

Even a local attorney could have gotten Junior off after that, but the Chicago lawyer made quite a speech when he asked for the case to be dismissed.

"Why did you say you did it?" Junior McGinnis asked Matt.

"Because I did."

Junior decided that was a joke. Several people remembered strange things about Tom Scheller. Once in fourth grade he had played a female role in a school play. It came to be common opinion that the boy had developed a twisted character and died at the hand of an unsavory aquaintance.

Matt left. Fifteen years ago he left. His father had died and his mother had Alzheimer's and Laura looked after her and practiced law and had her own family. He had called her maybe ten times since going away. But he would never go back. Maybe Laura and Junior had forgotten that long-ago Halloween night. They had been married now for ten years. It was all water over the dam for them. But it would never be for Matt. He had killed Tom Scheller, not even meaning to, and then had ruined his reputation, so that people spoke of him in whispers. Even the whispering would have stopped now, he supposed, and Tom's widowed mother had married again and moved to Arizona. Maybe nobody else even remembered Tom Scheller now. It didn't matter. Matt had condemned himself to wander like Oedipus to make up for what he had done. The old Greek had blinded himself but Matt wouldn't go that far. Exile was enough. Punctuated from time to time by a call home, when he could learn that life went on and that his class was having a reunion that neither he nor Tom Scheller would attend. ●

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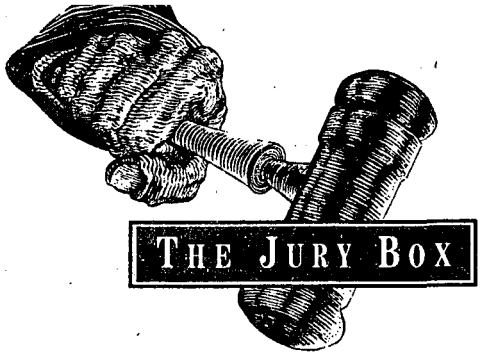

by Jon L. Breen

Mystery Writers of America anthologies have been a tradition since the new organization used *Murder Cavalcade* to benefit its treasury in 1946. The volumes have customarily appeared annually, though with gaps in recent years, and each has been edited or introduced by a major writer in the field. Though they have usually been published in hardcover, there were a few paperback originals in the fifties and early sixties, two of them edited by softcover specialists John D. MacDonald and Richard S. Prather. The latest in the series, rather surprisingly, returns to that format and is unusual in another way: Instead of comprising mostly reprints, it offers all new stories by a distinguished group of contributors.

Guilty as Charged (Pocket Books, $6.50), edited and introduced by bestselling lawyer-novelist Scott Turow, gathers 16 tales with legal themes, all well worth reading and many substantial enough in plot and incident to be expanded into full-length novels. Among the highlights are Andrew Klavan's "Lou Monahan, County Prosecutor," with its bitterly ironic conclusion; Lia Matera's "Dead Drunk," about the search for a serial killer of homeless people; and Ed Gorman's "That Day at Eagle's Point," among other things an informative description of capital punishment by lethal injection. But the prize of the collection may be "Cruel and Unusual," a tale of the jury room by Carolyn Wheat, who continues to turn out splendid work in both short-story and novel lengths. Among the other contributors are John Lutz, Marcia Muller, Bill Pronzini, Jay Brandon, John Jakes, Susan Dunlap, and Stuart M. Kaminsky, whose story about an ancestor of his present-day

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Russian cop Porfiry Petrovich Rostnikov neatly leads into the best novel I've read this month. **** Stuart M. Kaminsky: *Blood and Rubles,* Fawcett Columbine, $21. Rostnikov and his colleagues continue to struggle with the increased crime problems of post-Soviet Russia, including a gang of juvenile thieves, a vanishing houseful of art treasures, a kidnapped businessman, and a drive-by shooting. The ending is especially good, its general air of despair and cynicism tempered by a note of hope. This book has been out longer than the usual "Jury Box" entry, nearly a year—by the time you read this it may be available in paperback.

**** James Yaffe: *My Mother, the Detective,* Crippen & Landru, P.O. Box 9315, Norfolk, VA 23505-9315; $15 trade paperback, $40 signed limited hardcover. At last the stories about Mom, the New York Jewish mother and armchair detective who solves her policeman son's cases over weekly family dinners, have been gathered in book form. Originally published in *EQMM* between 1952 and 1968, they were followed by four novel-length cases between 1988 and 1992. Yaffe, who debuted in this magazine in 1943 at the age of fifteen, is a master of gentle humor, deft characterization, and fair-play puzzle spinning in the Ellery Queen tradition. (From the same publisher comes the first collection by another classicist and *EQMM* favorite, Patricia Moyes's *Who Killed Father Christmas and Other Unseasonable Demises* [$16 trade paperback; signed limited also available].)

*** Lisa Scottoline: *Legal Tender,* HarperCollins, $25. Philadelphia attorney Benedetta "Bennie" Rosato's law firm, formed with now-former lover Mark Biscardi, who has shifted his attentions to one of the firm's female associates, is breaking up—and Bennie's whole life threatens to join it, when she goes underground accused of murder. This is a bright, funny, and fast-reading example of the legal thriller, with enough narrative energy to make you overlook the improbabilities inherent in the plot.

*** Robert Leigh: *The Turner Journals,* Walker, $20.95. The jacket blurbs emphasize the finishing twist of this fresh, suspenseful, fast-moving New-York-cop-vs.-serial-killer police procedural, and the surprise of the last two sentences lives up to the hype. I don't think you'll anticipate the twist, but you may have a better chance at the identity of the pseudonymous author, described on the jacket as "a popular New York mystery writer." For readers with a sense

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of style, there are the clues to a probable suspect.

The latest anthology drawn from the backfiles of *EQMM* and *AHMM* is *Murder Intercontinental* (Carroll & Graf, $23), edited by Cynthia Manson and Kathleen Halligan. Ranging in date from the twenties (Agatha Christie's Poirot tale "The Adventure of the Egyptian Tomb") to a 1996 story by Batya Swift Yasgur, the entries emphasize foreign locales or, if within the United States, minority cultures. Of special interest is Manly Wade Wellman's 1947 tale "A Knife Between Brothers," the rarely reprinted second case for pioneering Native American sleuth David Return. Among the other major names present are Georges Simenon, Walter Satterthwait, Patricia McGerr, Patricia Highsmith, and Ruth Rendell.

If you don't demand mundane realism in a mystery, you'll enjoy *Supernatural Sleuths* (ROC, $5.99), a fine reprint anthology edited by Charles G. Waugh and Martin H. Greenberg. Beginning with the over-the-top EC-comics-style horror of William F. Nolan's "Lonely Train A'Comin' " and finishing with the investigations of science-fictional sleuth Gil "The Arm" Hamilton in Larry Niven's short novel "Death by Ecstasy," the volume includes representative cases of fictional ghost busters like Ron Goulart's Max Kearny, William Hope [illegible] son's Carnacki, and Sea[illegible] Quinn's Jules de Grandin; a[illegible] several other stories in which detective fiction intersects with s.f., fantasy, and supernatural horror elements. I especially enjoyed Paul Levinson's 1995 Analog story of time travel paradox (and a possibly unique fictional murderer), "The Chronology Protection Case."

For more than a quarter-century, Bowling Green University's Popular Press has been publishing significant books about crime and mystery fiction. One of their most welcome products is the first book-length biographical-critical account of a British writer arguably as significant in the history of the form as Agatha Christie or Dorothy L. Sayers, though far less widely read, reprinted, and discussed than either. Australian scholar Malcolm J. Turnbull's *Elusion Aforethought: The Life and Writing of Anthony Berkeley Cox* ($34.95 hardcover, $16.95 trade paper) effectively recounts the sparse available details of the subject's life while describing his work as A. B. Cox (Punch humorist), Anthony Berkeley (Golden Age puzzle master and creator of Roger Sheringham), and Francis Iles (pioneer of the modern crime novel and influential critic until his death in 1971).

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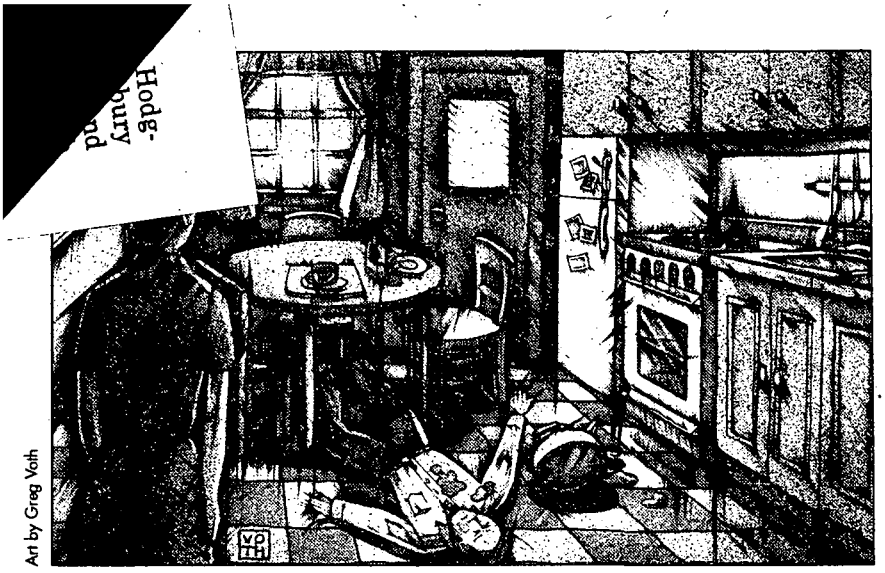

Art by Greg Voth

WAYZGOOSE

by Peter Lovesey

1.

A slight, worried woman in a leather jacket walked into Bath police station.

The desk sergeant eyed her through the protective glass. "Yes, ma'am?"

"Can I speak to someone?"

"You're speaking to me, ma'am."

"Someone senior."

The sergeant had been dealing with the public across this desk for twelve years. "I'm the best on offer."

Unamused, the woman waited. Her hair was dark and short, shaped to her head. She wore no makeup.

The sergeant coaxed her, "Why don't you give me some idea what it's about?"

"I just killed my husband."

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The sergeant bent closer to the glass. "You what?"

"I came in to confess."

"Hang about, ma'am. Where did this happen?"

"At home. Thirty-two, Collinson Road."

"He's there now?"

"His body is."

"Collinson Road. I ought to know it."

"Twerton."

The sergeant gestured to a woman police officer behind him and told her to get a response car out to Twerton. Then he asked the woman, "What's your name, ma'am?"

"Trish Noble."

"Trish for Patricia?"

"Yes."

"And your husband's name?"

"Glenn."

"What happened, Mrs. Noble?"

"He was in a drunken stupor at four in the afternoon when I came in from work, so I was that mad that I threw a teapot at him. Cracked him on the head. It killed him. Is that murder? Will I go to prison?"

"A china teapot?"

"Half full of tea. I've always had this wicked temper."

"Are you sure he's dead? Maybe you only stunned him."

She shook her head. "He's gone all right. I'm a ward sister, and I know."

"A nurse?"

"Shocking, isn't it?"

"You'd better come in and sit down," said the sergeant. "Go to the door on your right. Someone will see you right away."

The someone was Superintendent Peter Diamond, the senior detective on duty that afternoon. Diamond was head of the murder squad and this looked like a domestic incident, but as homicide had apparently occurred, he was in duty bound to take an interest.

In a review of his latest novel *Bloodhounds* (Mysterious Press), *PW* said: "Peter Lovesey demonstrates that his embrace of crime fiction reaches from John Dickson Carr to Andrew Vachss as he skillfully pays homage to the old-style whodunit in a thoroughly modern mystery." "Wayzgoose" too is a whodunit in the modern style. ¶

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He made quite a courtesy of pulling forward a low, upholstered chair for the woman, then spoilt the effect by seating himself in another with a bump as his knees refused his buttocks a dignified descent. He had a low centre of gravity. A rugby forward in years past, he was better built now for anchorman in a tug-of-war team.

"You're a nurse, I understand, Mrs. Noble?"

"Sister on one of the orthopaedic wards."

"Locally?"

"The Royal United."

"So . . . ?"

"I came off duty and when I got home Glenn—that's my husband—was the worse for liquor."

"You mean drunk?"

"Whatever you want to call it." She closed her eyes, as if that might shut out the memory.

Mild as milk, Diamond said, "You came in from work and saw him where?"

"In the kitchen."

"Did you have words?"

"He wasn't capable of words. I saw red. That's the way I am. I picked up the teapot—"

"You'd made tea?"

"No. I'd only just come in."

"So he'd made tea?"

"No, it was still on the table from breakfast, half full, really heavy. It's a family-sized pot. I picked it up and swung it at him. Hit him smack on the forehead. The pot smashed. There was tea all over his face and chest. He collapsed. First, I thought it was the drink. I couldn't believe I'd hit him that hard. He'd stopped breathing. I could get nothing from his pulse. I laid him out on the floor and tried mouth-to-mouth, but it was no good."

She conveyed a vivid picture, the more spectacular considering what a scrap she was. She spoke calmly, her pale blue eyes scarcely blinking. I wouldn't mind mouth-to-mouth from you, sister, Diamond incorrectly thought.

The door behind him opened and someone looked in, a sergeant. "A word in your ear, sir."

Diamond wasn't getting out of that chair. He put a thumb and forefinger to the lobe of his right ear.

The sergeant bent over and muttered, "Report just in from the house, sir. Body in the kitchen confirmed."

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Diamond nodded and asked Mrs. Noble, "You said this happened at four in the afternoon?"

"Yes."

"It's twenty to six now."

"Is it?"

"Quite a long time since it happened."

"I've been walking the streets, getting a grip on myself."

"You're doing okay," Diamond told her, and meant it. She was a nurse and used to containing her feelings, but this was a stern test. He admired her self-control and he was inclined to believe her story, even if it had strange features. "You didn't think of phoning us?"

"I'm here, aren't I?"

"Earlier, I mean. When it happened."

"No point. He was beyond help."

He offered her a hot drink for the shock—and just stopped short of mentioning tea.

She declined.

"You said you saw red at finding him drunk," he recapped.

Her face tensed. "I disapprove of drink."

"Was he in work?"

She shook her head. "He was one of those printers laid off from Regency Press a year ago."

"Was he still unemployed?"

"Yes."

"Depressed?"

"Certainly not."

"It must have been difficult managing after he lost his job," Diamond said, giving her the chance to say something in favour of her dead husband.

"Not at all. He got good redundancy terms. And I'm earning as well."

"I meant, perhaps he was drowning his sorrows?"

"What sorrows?"

"This afternoon bout was exceptional?"

"Very."

"Which was what upset you?"

She gave a nod. "It's against my religion."

Diamond treated the statement as if she were one of those earnest people in suits who knock on doors and ask whether you agree that God's message has relevance in today's world. He

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ignored it. "You're a nurse, Mrs. Noble, and I imagine you're trained to spot the symptoms of heavy drinking, so I don't want you to be insulted by this question. What made you decide that your husband was drunk?"

"The state of him. He was slumped in a chair, his eyes were glazed, he couldn't put two words together. And the brandy bottle was on the table in front of him. The brandy he was given as a leaving present. He promised me he'd got rid of it."

"Didn't he like brandy?"

"It's of the devil."

"Had he drunk from the bottle?"

"Isn't that obvious?"

"Had he ever used drugs in any form?"

She frowned. "Alcohol is a drug."

"You know what I mean, Mrs. Noble."

"And I've seen plenty of drug users," she riposted. "I know what to look for."

"No question of drugs?"

"No question."

"Did he look for another position after the printing came to a stop?"

"There wasn't much point. All the local firms were laying people off."

"So how did he spend the days?"

"Don't ask me. Walks in the park. Television. Have you ever been out of work?"

He nodded. "And my wife couldn't find a job either."

"Then you ought to know."

"Unemployment hits people in different ways. I'm trying to understand how it affected your husband."

"You're not," she said bluntly. "You're trying to find out if I murdered him. That's your job."

Diamond didn't deny it.

"It wasn't deliberate." She raised her chin defiantly. "I wouldn't dream of killing him. Glenn and I were married eleven years. We had fights. Of course we had fights, with my temper. That's my personal demon—my temper. I threw things. Mostly I missed. He could duck when he was sober." Her lips twitched into a sad smile. "We always made up. Some of the best times we had were making up after a fight."

Trish Noble's candour was touching. Diamond sympathised with

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her. There was little more he could achieve. "We'll need a statement, Mrs. Noble, a written one, I mean. Then you can go. Do you have someone you can stay with? Family, a friend?"

"Can't I go home?"

"Our people are going to be in the house for some time. You'd be better off somewhere else."

She told him she had a sister in Trowbridge. Diamond offered to make the call, but Trish Noble said she'd rather break the news herself.

2.

To most of the staff at Manvers Street police station, this room on the top floor was known as the eagle's nest. John Farr-Jones, the chief constable, greeted Diamond, who had arrived for a meeting of the high fliers. "You're looking fit, Peter."

"I used the lift."

"What's it like to be back in harness?"

The big detective gave him a pained look and said, "I gave up wearing harness when I was two years old." He took his place in a leather armchair and nodded to a chief inspector he scarcely knew. The wholesale changes of personnel in the couple of years he had been away had to be symptomatic of something.

"Mr. Diamond's problem is that we haven't had a juicy murder since he was reinstated," Farr-Jones told the rest of the room. Since it was thanks to Farr-Jones's recommendation that Diamond had got his job back, he may have felt entitled to rib the man a little. But really the recommendation had been little more than a rubber stamp. In October 1994, a dire emergency had poleaxed Avon and Somerset constabulary. The daughter of the assistant chief constable had been taken hostage and her captor had insisted on dealing only with Diamond. The old rogue elephant, boisterous as ever, was now back among the herd.

"What about this teapot killing?" Farr-Jones persisted. "Can't you get anything out of that?"

There were smiles all round.

John Wigfull unwisely joked, "A teabag?" There was a history of bad feeling between Wigfull and Diamond. Many a time Diamond had seriously contemplated grabbing the two ends of Wigfull's ridiculously overgrown moustache and seeing if he could knot them under his chin. Now that Diamond was back, Wigfull had been ousted as head of the murder squad and handed a less glam-

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ourous portfolio as head of CID operations. He would use every chance to point to Diamond's failings.

Tom Ray, the chief constable's staff officer, hadn't heard about the teapot killing, so Diamond, wholly against his inclination, was obliged to give a summary of the incident.

When he had finished, it was rather like being in a staff college seminar. Someone had to suggest how the law should deal with it.

"Manslaughter?" Ray ventured, more in politeness than anything else.

"No chance," growled Diamond.

Wigfull, who knew *Butterworth's Police Law* like some people know the Bible, seized the moment to shine. "Hold on. As I remember, there are four elements necessary to secure a manslaughter conviction. First, there must be an unlawful act. That's beyond doubt."

"Assault with a teapot," contributed Ray.

"Right. A half-full teapot. Second, the act has to be dangerous, in that any sober and reasonable person would recognize it could do harm."

"Clocking a fellow with a teapot is dangerous," Ray agreed, filling a role as chorus to Wigfull.

"Third, the act must be a cause of the death."

"Well, he didn't die of old age."

"And finally, it must be intentional. There's no question she meant to strike him."

"No question," Ray echoed him.

Diamond said flatly, "It was a sudden death."

"We can't argue with that, Peter," said Wigfull, and got a laugh.

"I'm reporting it to the coroner. It's going in as an occurrence report."

Wigfull said, "I think you should do a process report to the CPS."

"Bollocks."

"It would be up to them whether to prosecute," Wigfull pointed out.

Diamond's patience was short at the best of times and it was even shorter when he was on shaky ground. He stabbed a finger at Wigfull. "Don't you lecture me on the CPS. I refuse to dump on this woman. She's a nurse, for pity's sake. She walked all the way here from Twerton and reported what she'd done. If the coroner wants to refer it, so be it. He won't have my support."

Ray asked, "Have you been out to Twerton yourself?"

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"I haven't had a chance, have I?" said Diamond. "I'm attending a meeting, in case anyone hadn't noticed. Julie is out there."

"Inspector Hargreaves?" said Farr-Jones. "Is that wise? She isn't so experienced as some of your other people."

"She was my choice for this, sir." He didn't want to get into an argument over Julie's capability, or his right to delegate duties, but if necessary he would.

He was first out of the meeting, muttering sulphurous things about John Wigfull, Farr-Jones, and the whole boiling lot of them. He stomped downstairs to his office to collect his raincoat and trilby. He'd had more than enough of the job for that day.

Someone got up as he entered the room, a stocky, middle-aged man with black-framed bifocals. Dr. Jack Merlin, the forensic pathologist. "What's up?" Merlin said. "You're looking even more stroppy than usual."

"Don't ask."

"Have you got a few minutes?"

"I was about to leave," said Diamond.

"Before you do, old friend, I'd like a quiet word. Why don't you shut that door?"

The "old friend" alerted Diamond like nothing else. His dealings with Merlin—over upwards of a dozen corpses in various states of decomposition—were based on mutual respect. Jack was the best reader of human remains in Britain. But he rarely, if ever, expressed much in the way of sentiment. Diamond grabbed the door handle and pulled it shut.

"This one at Collinson Road, Twerton," said Merlin. "The man hit with a teapot."

"Yes?"

"You don't mind me asking, I hope. Did you visit the scene yourself?"

Diamond shrugged. "I was tied up here. I sent one of my younger inspectors out."

"Good," said Merlin. "I didn't think you had."

"Something wrong?"

"You interviewed the wife, I believe?"

"Yes."

"She claimed to have topped him with a teapot?"

He nodded. "She's a ward sister at the RUH. Bit uptight, got religion rather badly, I think, which makes it harder for her."

Merlin fingered the lobe of his left ear. "The thing is, matey, I

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thought I should have a quiet word with you at this stage. Shan't know the cause of death until I've done the p.m., of course, but . . ."

"Give it to me, Jack."

". . . a first inspection suggests that the victim suffered a couple of deep stab wounds."

"Stab wounds?"

"In the back."

Diamond swore.

"Not a lot of blood about," the pathologist added, "and he was lying faceup, so I wouldn't be too critical of that young inspector, but it does have the signs of a suspicious death."

3.

Collinson Road, Twerton, backs on to Brunel's Great Western Railway a mile or so west of the centre of Bath. Diamond drove into a narrow street of Victorian terraced housing, the brickwork blackened by all those locomotives steaming by in years past. Several of the facades had since been cleaned up and gentrified with plastic guttering, picture windows, and varnished oak front doors with brass fittings, but Number Thirty-two was resolutely unaltered, sooty and unobtrusive behind an overgrown privet hedge and a small, neglected strip of garden. The door stood open. The scenes-of-crime officers had received Diamond's urgent instruction to step up the scale of their work and were still inside. Most of them knew him from years back, and as he went in he had to put up with some good-natured chaffing over his intentions. It was well known that he'd been moodily waiting for a murder to fall in his lap.

The team had finished its work downstairs, so he went through the hallway with the senior man, Derek Bignal, and looked inside the kitchen. Almost everything portable had been removed for inspection by the lab. Strips of adhesive tape marked the positions of the table and chairs and the outline of the body.

Diamond asked if the murder weapon had been found.

"Who knows?" said Bignal with a shrug, practically causing paranoia in Peter Diamond so soon after his conversation with Merlin, the laid-back pathologist. "We made a collection of kitchen knives. See the magnetic strip attached to the wall over the draining-board? They were all lined up there, ready to grab. Some of them had blades that could have done the business."

"No other knife in the sink, or lying on the floor?"

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"With blood and prints all over it? You want it easy, Mr. Diamond."

He tried visualising the scene, which was no simple task with the furniture missing. According to her story, Trish Noble had returned from the hospital at four in the afternoon. If she was speaking the truth, she must have let herself in at the front door, stepped through the hallway, and found her husband seated facing her at the small table against the wall to her left as she entered the kitchen. In a fit of anger, believing him to be drunk, rather than mortally injured, she would have taken a couple of steps towards the table, where the teapot was, snatched it up and hit him with it. He had fallen off to the right of the chair—her right—and lay on his back on the floor, where she had tried resuscitation. That, anyway, was her version. The taped outline of the body didn't conflict with what she had stated.

To Diamond's left was a refrigerator-freezer. The doors were decorated with postcards and photos. The shiny surfaces bore traces of powder where they had been dusted for prints. Holiday snaps of Glenn Noble, deeply tanned, in shorts and sandals, his arms around the shoulders of his pretty, bikini-clad wife. More of Trish Noble in her nurse's uniform, giggling with friends. A sneaky shot of her taken in a bathroom, eyes wide in surprise, holding a towel against her breasts, evidently unaware that her right nipple wasn't covered. Surprising that a woman who claimed to be religious kept such a picture on her fridge door, Diamond mused, then decided that nurses must have a different perception of embarrassment. Another that took his attention was clearly taken on some seaside promenade. Glenn and an older, stocky man were giving piggyback rides to two women in swimsuits, one of them Trish—but it wasn't Glenn's back she was riding.

Diamond sighed. To study people's private snaps systematically like this was an invasion of privacy, an odious but necessary part of the job. He wasn't in the house to look for evidence. Others had already been through for that. He was getting a sense of how the couple had lived and what their relationship had been. Having thought what a liberty it was, he stripped every photo off the fridge door.

"What's a wayzgoose when it's at home?" he asked Bignal.

"Come again."

"A wayzgoose. This picture of the two couples horsing about on the seafront has a note on the back. Wayzgoose, 1993, Minehead."

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"Is it a place?"

"Minehead is."

"Could it be the name of some game, do you think?"

"I doubt it."

He looked into the other rooms downstairs. One was clearly the living room, with two armchairs, a TV and VCR, a music centre, and a low table stacked with newspapers. The Nobles read the *Daily Mirror* and possessed just about every recording Freddie Mercury had made. On the wall were a bullfight poster and an antique map of Somerset. He picked an expensive-looking art book from a shelf otherwise stacked with nursing magazines. "Who's Eugene Delacroix?"

"A French romantic painter," Bignal informed him.

Diamond flicked the pages over. "Doesn't seem to go with Freddie Mercury and the *Mirror*."

"There were also two coffee mugs on the table," Bignal told him. "By the look of them, they were left over from last night. They're going to the lab."

It was not vastly different from his own living room. He moved on. The front room was used as a workroom by the couple, for sewing, typing, and storing household bills and bank statements. They had a joint account and seemed to be steadily in credit, which was better than the Diamonds managed.

In another ten minutes the team finished upstairs. No signs of violence there, they informed Diamond. The aggro seemed to have been confined to the kitchen.

He went to see for himself.

The Nobles favoured a rather lurid pink for their bedroom, slept in a standard-size double bed, and had a portable TV on the chest of drawers Glenn used for most of his clothes. Trish Noble had a wardrobe and a dressing table to herself. She was reading Catherine Cookson and the Bible and Glenn had been into one of the Flashman books. If the quantity and variety of condoms in Glenn's bedside cabinet was any guide, their sex life hadn't been subdued by Trish's religion.

The second bedroom contained a folding bed, an ironing board, and various items the couple must have acquired and been unwilling to throw away, ranging from an old record player to a dartboard with the wire half detached.

He glanced into the bathroom. Nothing caught his attention.

"What's in the back garden?" he asked Bignal.

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"Plants, mostly."

"Don't push me, Derek. Have you been out there?"

"Personally, no."

"Has anyone thought of looking for a murder weapon, footprints, a means of escape?"

"Not systematically," Bignal admitted. "It was already dark when we got here."

"Not systematically," muttered Diamond with heavy sarcasm. "It backs onto the railway, doesn't it?"

"Yes."

"Tomorrow, early, I want a proper search made. In particular, I want to know if there are signs that anyone got in or out by way of the railway embankment."

Bignal's eyebrows peaked in surprise. "You think someone else is involved, as well as the wife?"

"That's the way they would have escaped."

"They?"

"He, she, they, or nobody at all. Let's keep an open mind, shall we?"

4.

Julie Hargreaves may have expected a roasting for having failed to notice the stab wounds, but she need not have troubled. Diamond was more interested in roasting Trish Noble. "She had the kid-glove treatment from me yesterday," he summed up as they drove out to Trowbridge. "Today she's got to be given a workover."

"Do you see her as the killer?"

"Do you?"

She paused for thought. "It would be unusual, a woman using a knife as a weapon. The teapot, I can believe—but why would she hit him with the teapot if she'd already stuck a knife in his back?"

"To finish him off."

"Ah."

"However, there could be a second person involved." Diamond casually tossed in some information he'd received that morning from the scenes-of-crime officers combing the back garden at Twerton. "There's evidence that someone climbed over the fence to the railway embankment. Two slats are freshly splintered at the top."

"An intruder? Nothing was stolen."

"Yes, but if she had an admirer, for instance . . ."

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Julie didn't buy the idea. "That's pretty unlikely, isn't it?"

"You mean with her religious convictions? I said 'admirer,' not 'lover.' "

"No, I mean he wouldn't need to climb over the fence. She'd let him in. And they would have to be real thickos to stab the husband and then go down to the nick and report it."

He responded huffily, "I didn't say it was a conspiracy. Unrequited love, Julie. The admirer is obsessed with Trish. She's unattainable while her husband is alive, so this nutter breaks into the house and knifes him. Trish comes home and finds Glenn dying, but mistakenly thinks he's drunk."

"And bashes him with the teapot?"

"Exactly. I think she told the truth yesterday. By now she may have something else to tell us."

"I wonder," said Julie. "I find it difficult to believe in this crazy admirer."

Diamond said loftily, "You may understand better when you meet Trish Noble. She's on the side of the angels and bloody attractive. Dangerous combination."

"That would explain everything," murmured Julie in a bland tone. "Shall I organise house-to-house to find out if anyone was spotted on the railway embankment yesterday afternoon?"

"It's under way," he told her. "Two teams."

Trish Noble's sister lived in a semidetached on a council estate north of Trowbridge. But it was the bloody attractive young widow herself who answered their knock. In jeans and a white T-shirt, with the height and figure of a preteen schoolgirl, she looked too frail to use a knife on a chocolate cake, let alone a man. The hours since the killing had taken a toll. Her big eyes were red-lidded and they seemed to have sunk deeper into her skull. Julie must have wondered at Diamond's ideas of attractiveness.

He introduced her and said there were things he needed to ask. Trish calmly invited them in, explaining that she had the house to herself because her sister was at work.

In a narrow sitting room, watched by two unwelcoming spaniels, Diamond took the best armchair and launched straight into the workover. "You didn't kill your husband with the teapot, Mrs. Noble. He was stabbed in the back."

She frowned and stared.

Julie said, "Why don't you sit down?" She stood behind the second armchair until Trish Noble acted on the advice.

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"Did you stab him?" Diamond asked.

Trish seemed to have difficulty taking in what she had just been told—or she was making a convincing show of being stunned by the news. She shook her head.

Diamond said, "If you'd like to explain how it happened, we're ready to listen."

She said, "Stabbed?"

"Twice, in the back."

"That's impossible. He was sitting in the kitchen."

"Your story."

"It's true! He was at the table when I got in. I've told you this."

"You didn't stab him yourself?"

"That's insulting."

"We'd like a clear answer, Mrs. Noble."

She said vehemently, "No, I did not stab my own husband."

"That's clear, then." Diamond glanced across at Julie, who had found an upright chair by the sideboard. "Got that? She denies it."

Julie opened her notebook.

"If you didn't stab him yourself," Diamond plunged in again, "we've obviously got to look for someone who did. Was there anyone else in the house when you got home from the hospital?"

The tired eyes widened. "No one."

"You're sure? You can't be sure, can you? Let's take this in stages. Did you see anyone?"

"No. This is unbelievable."

"Or hear them?"

"No."

"Is there anyone else living in the house?"

"What do you mean—a lodger? No."

"Does anyone have a key?"

"What?"

"Some friend, perhaps?"

"We don't give keys to our friends."

"I'll tell you what I have in mind," Diamond offered. "If someone let himself into the house unknown to your husband, he could have taken him by surprise and stabbed him shortly before you came in."

"Who would do that?" she said, and there was a note of scorn in the voice. She was getting over the shock.

"Do you have a lover?"

She reddened, but that wasn't necessarily an admission. Almost

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anyone would have blushed at the question. She told him with a glare, "You should wash out your mouth."

"Would you like it rephrased?" Diamond said. "A boyfriend? A fancy man? A bit on the side? Come on, Mrs. Noble, you work in a hospital. Life in the raw. I don't have to pick my words with you, do I?"

"I am a married woman—or was," she answered primly. "I took vows before the Lord."

"No need for a boyfriend?"

The look she gave him was her response and he was convinced by it. Moreover, he'd seen inside her husband's bedside drawer.

"In that case, we have to consider what used to be called unrequited love. To put it crudely, some nutter who fancies you. You see what I'm driving at, don't you? This man obsessed by you murders your husband to have you to himself."

She sighed like a scythe and said, "I can't listen to these serpent-words."

"No secret admirer you're aware of? Let's look at another possibility. Did your husband have any enemies?"

The change of tack brought a more measured response. "Glenn didn't have enemies."

"Then did he have friends? Encouraging him in bad habits, perhaps?"

She said, "I can do without your sarcasm."

"These are friends, presumably?" He took from his pocket the photo taken at Minehead, the piggyback picture. "Were these people in the printing trade?"

She snatched it possessively. "You were the one who stole them, then. My photos are personal."

"Who are the people?"

The resentment remained in her voice. "The Porterfields. Friends of ours. We had a day out with them."

"Is Mr. Porterfield a printer?"

"No. Basil is a businessman. He sells car parts."

"And the lady?"

"His wife Serena. She's an art teacher."

"That's Serena mounted on your husband's back?"

She gave him a cold stare. "That was for a silly photograph."

"At Minehead?"

"Yes."

"For a wayzgoose?"

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She frowned. "I beg your pardon."

"Look on the back. My dictionary says that a wayzgoose is a works outing for those in a printing house. A silly photo at a wayzgoose makes sense to me."

She glanced at the words on the back of the photo and shrugged. "It doesn't make any to me. Basil and Serena had nothing to do with Glenn's job. Besides, he was already redundant when we went to Minehead. He'd been out of work for over a year."

"I noticed an art book in your living room. French painter."

"Delacroix?"

"Yes. Was that a gift from Mrs. Porterfield?"

"No. Glenn bought it himself."

"So he was interested in art?"

"Only in Delacroix."

"Are the Porterfields local?"

"They live up by the golf course."

"What's the address?"

"I don't want them troubled. They've got nothing to do with this. They're decent people."

"In that case, they'll want to help me find your husband's killer."

She said openly, "I can't believe this is happening. I thought I killed him. I was sure of it."

If she is playing the innocent, Diamond thought, she's doing it with style. He tried to resist making up his mind. First impressions were so misleading. In his time he'd made more mistakes over women than King Henry the Eighth. And this one with her martyred eyes was taking the steam out of his workover.

"After you hit him with the teapot and he fell off the chair, what did you do? Tell me precisely."

"I went to him at once. I could tell from the way he fell that he was out cold when he hit the floor. I found he'd stopped breathing, so I tried to revive him. Tilted back his head and drew the chin upwards. I don't have to go through the drill, do I?"

"Mouth-to-mouth?"

"Of course."

"Think carefully. While you were doing it, did you hear any extraneous sounds?"

"What do you mean?"

"If anyone else was in the house, in that kitchen, even, they may have picked this moment to run out." It was a wily suggestion. He couldn't have handed her a better opportunity of

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shifting the suspicion to some mythical intruder.

She hesitated, then said, "I didn't notice a thing."

Innocent, or refusing to be drawn? He couldn't tell. "After the resuscitation had no result, what did you do?"

She bit her lip. "It's difficult to remember. It's just a blur. I was deeply shocked."

"Did you stay in the kitchen?"

"For a bit, I think."

"You didn't go upstairs, or in the other rooms?"

"I don't think so. I was horrified by what I'd done. I got the shakes. I think I ran out of the front door and wandered up the street asking the Lord to forgive me. It took Him a long time to calm my troubled spirit. In the end I walked all the way to Bath to confess to you."

"Did you speak to anyone between leaving the house and coming to us?"

"No."

"See anyone you knew?"

"I wasn't noticing other people." She made it all sound plausible.

"If there was anyone," said Diamond, becoming reasonable in spite of efforts to be tough, "it would help us to account for your movements."

"I've told you my movements."

"And we only have your word for them."

"That was after he died. Why do you want to know what I was doing after he died?"

He declined to answer. "Is there anyone you can think of who ever threatened your husband?"

"No."

Julie looked up from her notes and said unexpectedly, "Was he seeing a woman?"

Trish Noble blinked twice and flicked nervously at her hair. "If he was . . ." she started to say, then stopped. "If he was, I'd be very surprised."

"The wife usually is," Diamond added, privately wishing he'd remembered to ask. Smart thinking on Julie's part. "Anyone you can think of who may have fancied him?"

"How would I know? Look, you're talking about the man I loved and married. He isn't in his grave yet. Do you have to be so cruel?"

Julie said, "You want us to find the person who stabbed him, don't you?"

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She nodded.

"There is someone, isn't there?" said Julie.

"I don't know."

"But you had your suspicions?"

She looked down and fingered her wedding ring. Speaking in a low, scarcely audible voice, she said, "Sometimes he came home really late. I mean about two in the morning, or later. He was exhausted. Too tired for anything."

"Drunk?"

"No. I would have noticed."

"How long was this going on?"

"When it started, it was once every two months or so. Lately, it was about every ten days."

"Did you question him about it?"

"He snapped my head off when I did. Really told me to mind my own business. It made me think there might be someone, but I had no way of finding out. He didn't smell of scent, or anything."

Diamond told her to collect her coat.

She looked seriously worried. "Where are you taking me?"

"Home. Julie will take you home. I want you to look at the scene and tell Julie everything you remember."

"Aren't you going to be there?" A question that might have conveyed disappointment was actually spoken on a rising note of relief.

"I may come later." He turned to Julie. "On the way, you can drop me off at the hospital."

Trish's anxiety flooded in again. "The hospital? Do you mean the RUH? You don't have to talk to them. They can't tell you anything."

"It isn't about you," said Diamond. "It's another matter."

And it wasn't about his weight problem either.

5.

"Believe it or not, I didn't come here to admire your sewing," Diamond told Jack Merlin.

There was no reaction from the pathologist.

"May I see the other side?"

"Not my sewing. My assistant Rodney does the stitchwork." In the postmortem room at the Royal United Hospital, Merlin had the advantage of familiar territory. No visitor was entirely comfortable in the mortuary. Attendance at autopsies is routinely expected of detectives on murder cases. Diamond ducked out whenever he could think up a plausible excuse. On this visit he arrived late. The

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gory stuff had already been got over. With only a sewn-up corpse to view, he was putting on a good show of self-composure, but it didn't run to treating these places like a second home.

The assistant, Rodney, stepped forward and helped Merlin turn the body of Glenn Noble. Two eye-shaped stab wounds were revealed.

Diamond's hands tightened behind his back. "Not much doubt about those."

Merlin watched him and said nothing.

"They don't look superficial, either."

Still nothing.

"I reckon they tell a story."

There was a long interval of silence before Diamond spoke again. "You're a helpful bugger, aren't you? You know I'm pig-ignorant, yet you're not going to help me out."

Merlin shot an amused look across the corpse and then relented. "This one to the right of the spine did the main damage. Penetrated the lung two inches above its basal margin."

Diamond bent closer to the body to examine the wounds. "Obviously you've cleaned him up."

"You don't get much external bleeding from stab wounds. There was a pint or so in the right pleural cavity."

"So was that what killed him?"

"It was a potentially fatal injury."

"The cause of death, in other words."

"The potential cause of death."

Diamond straightened up, frowning. "Am I missing something here?"

"I can't be specific as to the cause."

"With a couple of stab wounds like this and massive internal bleeding? Come on, Jack. Give me a break."

Merlin said, "As I understand it, the wife admitted to you that she cracked him on the head with a teapot."

"I believe her. Somebody certainly smashed a teapot. His shirt-front was stained with tea, as I'm sure forensic will tell us in their own good time. Probably tell us if it was Brooke Bond or Tetley's and whether she warmed the pot."

"There's bruising here on the head, just above the hairline," Merlin confirmed.

"Look, what is this about the teapot? The man has two deep stab wounds."

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"And a bruised cranium."

Diamond screwed his face into an anguished expression. "Are you telling me it's possible that the teapot actually finished him off?"

"It's an interesting question. I can't exclude the possibility of a fatal brain injury. Of course, I'll examine the brain."

"Haven't you done that?"

"It has to be fixed and cut in sections for microscopic examination."

"How long will that take?"

"Three to four weeks."

"God help us." He complained because of his own frustration. He knew Merlin would give him all the information he could as soon as it was available. He was the best.

"And even after I examine the brain, I may not have the answer."

"Oh, come on, Jack!"

"I mean it. I've examined people who died after blows to the head and I could find no perceptible damage to the brain. We don't know why it happens. Maybe the shock wave passing through the brain stem was sufficient to kill them."

"So even after four weeks, you may not have the answer?"

"I'm a pathologist, not an ace detective."

There was an interval of silence.

"Let me get one thing clear in my mind," said Diamond. "Is it possible that what Mrs. Noble told me is true—that he was still alive when she clobbered him?"

"Certainly."

"With stab wounds like this?"

"A victim of stabbing may survive for some time."

"How long?"

"How long is a piece of string?"

"Your middle name wouldn't be Prudence, by any chance?"

Merlin smiled.

"A few seconds? A few minutes?"

"I couldn't possibly say."

"And how would he have appeared? Unsteady, like a drunk?"

"Your guess is as good as mine."

"A distressed drunk?"

"Distressed is probably right."

"Unable to speak?"

"That's possible. The knife cut through some of the blood vessels

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and airways in the lung, so there was bleeding not only into the chest cavity but into the air passages. That would have affected his power of speech."

"You see what I'm getting at?" said Diamond.

Merlin grinned. "You're testing the woman's story. I was at the scene before you, remember," he rubbed it in. "I saw the brandy bottle on the table. But I'm not given to speculation, as you know."

"Jack, I could be making an arrest very soon. Someone entered that house and stabbed him. Not the wife. I'm convinced she's telling the truth."

"Do you have a suspect?"

"I'm getting close."

"I wouldn't get too close. If you nab them for murder at this stage, you could be torn to shreds by a good defence counsel. Mrs. Noble admits that she clobbered her husband with the teapot. She may have killed him, stabbing or no stabbing."

6.

It was a five-minute drive, no more, from the hospital to the murder house in Collinson Road. Frustrated by his session with Jack Merlin, Diamond looked to Julie Hargreaves for some progress in the investigation. He had left her there with Trish Noble, ostensibly checking the contents of the house to see if anything had been stolen. More importantly, she would have been working on drawing Trish out, putting her at her ease, and gaining her confidence in the way that she did with women suspects almost without seeming to try. If there were secrets in the lives of the Nobles, Julie was best placed to unlock them.

When he looked in, the two women were waiting in that chintzy living room with the bullfight poster and the map of Somerset. The television was on and coffee and biscuits were on the table. There must be something wrong with my methods, Diamond thought. While I look at a dead body, my sidekick puts her feet up and watches the box.

"Am I interrupting?" he asked.

Julie looked up. "We were waiting for you."

"What are you watching—a kids' programme?"

"Actually, we were looking out of the window at the SOCOs in the back garden." She reached for the remote control and switched off. "They look as if they're about to pack up. Would you like coffee?"

"Had a hospital one, thanks." In a paper cup from a machine

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and tasting of tomato soup, he might have added. He wouldn't want another drink for some time. He reached for the packet of chocolate digestives and helped himself. "What's the report, then? Anything missing?"

"Most of the furniture from my kitchen," Trish Noble said accusingly.

"That'll be the scenes-of-crime team," Diamond told her. "They must have left you a checklist somewhere. You'll get everything back eventually."

"They weren't the ones who pinched the photos from my fridge door."

He said smoothly, "You'll get them back." He reached for the art book he'd remarked on before and leafed through the pages. "Is anything of value missing? Money? Jewellery?"

Julie answered for her. "We checked. Everything seems to be there."

"Speaking of money," Diamond said to Trish, as if she had brought up the subject herself, "we'll need to look at the bank account and your credit-card statements. You do have a credit card? How are you placed financially? I'm not being nosy. We need to know." He knew, but he wanted to question her on the details.

"We're solvent," she answered without looking up.

He hadn't Julie's talent for easing out the information. "Your husband must have been given a lump sum when he was made redundant."

She only nodded, so he talked on.

"It seems generous at the time, but it soon goes, I daresay. Where do you keep the statements?"

"They should still be in the front room, if your people haven't taken them away."

"Would you mind?" he asked her.

In the short interval when Trish was out of the room, Diamond asked Julie what she had learned of importance.

"Glenn was up to something that she didn't care for," said Julie. "I think we touched a raw nerve asking if he had been two-timing her with some other woman."

"You touched the nerve," he said. "That was your contribution."

Julie flushed slightly. She wasn't used to credit from Peter Diamond. "Anyway, she's suspicious, but she isn't sure."

"She wouldn't have stuck a knife in his back unless she was damned sure."

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Trish returned and handed across the statements. He studied them. "High standard of living. Shopping at the best boutiques. Meals out at Clos du Roy and the Priory. A holiday in the south of France."

"That's the way we chose to spend our money."

"But it doesn't seem to have hit your bank balance."

"Glenn had his redundancy cheque."

"What's this restaurant in Exeter that you visited twice in August?"

"The Lemon Tree? We often eat there after visiting his brother. Alec's home is a working paper mill, a lovely old place in the country near Torquay, but he forgets that people need to eat."

"I can take a hint. We'll get you back to your sister's," said Diamond.

Seated in the front whilst Julie drove, he tried drawing out Trish by talking about the pressures that nurses had to work under. "My own health is pretty good, thank God, but in this line of work you get to see the insides of hospitals all too often. The RUH is one of the better ones. I still wouldn't care to be a nurse."

She didn't comment. Perhaps she found it hard to imagine the big policeman nursing anyone.

"How long have you worked there, Mrs. Noble?"

"Three years."

"And before that?"

"Frenchay."

Another local hospital, in Bristol.

"It's a vocation, isn't it?" Diamond rambled on. "Nursing isn't a job, it's a vocation. So is doctoring. Better paid, but still a vocation. I'm less sure about some of the others who work in hospitals. The administrators. It's out of proportion. All those managers."

She didn't take his pause as an invitation to join in.

"They tell me the Health Service managers are the only lot who are on the increase," he said. "Oh, and counsellors. Counselling is the biggest growth industry of all. We need it for everything these days. Child care, education, careers, marriage, divorce, unemployment, alcoholism, bereavement. I don't know how we managed before. If there's a major disaster—a train crash or a flood—the first thing they announce after the number of deaths is that counsellors are with the families. We even have counsellors for the police. Something ugly comes our way, like a serial murder case, or child abuse, and half the murder squad are reckoned to need

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counselling. Watch out for the counsellors, Mrs. Noble. If they haven't found you yet, you may be sure they're about to make a case study of you."

She didn't respond. She was looking out the window.

"Me too, probably," said Diamond.

7.

"Give me the dope on the Porterfields," Diamond said as Julie steered the car out of the police station yard and headed for Widcombe Hill. On his instruction, she'd spent the last hour checking.

"They've lived in Bath for the last five years. Moved out of a terraced house in Bear Flat at the end of 1993 and into this mansion by the golf course. There must be good profits in car parts."

He grunted his assent. "You're talking to a man who just had to buy a set of new tyres."

"She drives a Porsche and he has a Mercedes."

"And people like me paid for them."

"Oh, and her name isn't really Serena. It's plain Ann."

"What's wrong with Ann?" he demanded. "I once had a girlfriend called Ann. The last word in sophistication. Stilettos and hot pants. Don't suppose you know what hot pants are."

"Were," murmured Julie.

"Well, we can't arrest her for changing her name." Diamond wrenched his thoughts back from his steamy past. "Who's your money on, Julie? Do you still think Glenn Noble had a mistress?"

"Yes—and Trish believes it, too."

"So who's the killer—an angry husband?"

"Or boyfriend."

He didn't mention Jack Merlin's bombshell—that Trish might, after all, have struck the fatal blow. "Any idea who? Basil Porterfield?"

She said, "I'll have a better idea when I meet him."

"You can spot a skirt chaser at fifty paces, can you?"

"If you don't mind me saying," Julie commented, "that's a rather outdated expression."

"Un-hip?"

"Yes."

"Well," he went on, unabashed, "I have to agree with you that it was some visitor to the house."

"But who?"

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He spread his hands. "Could be anyone. Could be the Bishop of Bath and Wells for all we know."

"The Porterfields were friends, close friends," Julie pointed out. "How many of your women friends would you hoist on your back for a photo?"

"All at once?"

She said on a note of exasperation, "Mr. Diamond, sir, I'm trying to make a serious point. We know that Glenn was often out until the small hours. If we could confirm that he was sleeping with Serena . . ."

"Hold on, Julie. That's a large assumption, isn't it? Trish Noble doesn't seem to think he needed to go elsewhere for sex."

"She had her suspicions, believe me. You have to understand a woman's thinking. She may have said the opposite, but he was getting home so late that something was obviously going on. She's too proud or too puritanical to admit it to you and me."

"He could have been up to something entirely different."

"Such as?"

"A poker school. He wouldn't tell her if he was playing cards into the small hours. God and gambling don't mix."

Julie wasn't impressed by that suggestion. "She said he was tired when he got in."

"Well, it was late."

"Too tired for anything."

After a pause, he said, "Was that what she meant? This God-fearing woman who keeps a Bible by her bed?"

"That doesn't mean she's undersexed."

"Fair point," said Diamond after a moment's reflection. "There's more bonking in the Bible than there is in Jilly Cooper and Jackie Collins together. So she interprets his reduced libido as evidence of infidelity? It's speculation, Julie, whether it's her speculation or yours."

She was resolute. "Maybe it is, but if she's right, Serena Porterfield is in real danger—if she isn't already murdered. We can't ignore the possibility, speculation or not."

The Porterfields' mock-Tudor mansion was on the slopes of Bathampton Down, with all of the city as a gleaming backdrop of pale cream stone and blue slate roofs. The house stood among lawns as well trimmed as the greens of the Bath Golf Club nearby. A gardener was on a ladder pruning the Albertine rose that covered much of one side of the house. A white Mercedes was

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on the drive. The chances of anyone from here being involved in a stabbing in a small terraced house in Twerton seemed remote.

Basil Porterfield opened the front door before they knocked. There was no question that he was the man in the Minehead photo—a sturdy, smiling, sandy-haired embodiment of confidence, even after Diamond told him they were police officers.

"Perhaps you heard that Glenn Noble is dead, sir?"

"Saw it in the paper. Devastating." Porterfield didn't look devastated, but out of respect he shook his head. "It's a long time since I saw Glenn."

"But you were friends?"

"He was the sort you couldn't help liking. Look, why don't you come in?"

The welcome was unstinting. In a room big enough for the golf club AGM, they were shown to leather armchairs and offered sherry.

Diamond glanced at the teak wall units laden with pottery and art books. "This is a far cry from Bear Flat."

"We worked hard to move up in the world," said Porterfield evenly.

"You're in the motor trade, I understand."

"Curiously enough, we prospered in the recession. I don't sell new cars, I sell parts, and people were doing up their old vehicles rather than replacing them. The business really took off. We have outlets in France and Spain now."

"You visit these countries?"

"Regularly."

"And your business is based in Bath?"

"You must have passed it often enough, down the hill, on the Warminster Road."

"Glenn Noble—was he a business contact?"

"Purely social. Through my wife, actually. She took a school project to the printers he worked for. Serena teaches art, printmaking, that sort of thing. You can see her influence all around you."

"Is Mrs. Porterfield at home today?"

"No. She's, em, out of the country."

Julie's eyes sought Diamond's and held them for a moment.

He remarked to Porterfield, "She must be devastated, too."

"She doesn't know anything about it."

Diamond played a wild card. "You said you haven't seen the Nobles for a long time. Perhaps your wife saw them more recently."

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Porterfield asked smoothly, "Why do you say that?"

Julie, equally smoothly, invented an answer. "Someone answering your wife's description was seen recently in the company of Glenn Noble."

"Is that so? Funny she didn't mention it." He was unfazed.

"Just for the record," said Diamond, "would you mind telling me where you were on Monday afternoon between three and five?"

"Monday between three and five." Porterfield frowned, as if he hadn't remotely considered that he might be asked. "I would have been at the office. I'm sure my staff will confirm that, if you care to ask them."

"And your wife?"

"She's in France, like I said, on a school trip." He smiled. "She left last week. Last Friday."

"Where did you say she teaches?"

Cavendish College was a girls' public school on Lyncombe Hill. The Head informed Diamond that Mrs. Porterfield was indeed on a sixth-form trip to the south of France. She frequently led school parties to places of artistic interest in Europe. She was a loyal, talented teacher, and an asset to the school.

Diamond used a mobile phone to get this information. He and Julie were parked in North Road, with a good view of the Porterfield residence.

"Are you relieved?" he asked Julie. "Serena survives, apparently."

"I still say he murdered Glenn Noble."

"And I say you're right."

Her eyes widened. "Am I?"

"But he had the decency to do it while his wife was away. We'll arrest her when she returns."

"Whatever for?"

"Hold on a little and I'll show you, if my theory is right. Serena's talent may be an asset to the school, but it's a bigger asset to Basil Porterfield. What time is it?"

"Ten past six."

"After our visit he's not stopping here much longer."

Twenty minutes, as it turned out. The Mercedes glided into North Road and down the hill, with Julie and Diamond in discreet pursuit. Porterfield turned right at the junction with the busy Warminster Road. Three-quarters of a mile on, he slowed and

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pulled in to the forecourt of a building with PORTERFIELD CAR SPARES in large letters across the front.

"Drive past and park as near as you can."

Julie found a lay-by a short walk away.

When they approached on foot, the only cover available was the side wall of Porterfield's building. From it they had a view of the empty Mercedes parked on the forecourt. "I should have called for some backup, but we can handle this, can't we?" said Diamond.

Julie lifted one eyebrow and said nothing.

Diamond issued an order. "When he comes out, you go across and nick him."

She lifted the other eyebrow.

He told her, "I'm the backup."

Five minutes passed. The traffic on the Warminster Road zoomed by steadily.

"He's coming."

Julie tensed.

Porterfield emerged from the building trundling a hand trolley stacked with white cartons. He set the trolley upright, took some keys from his pocket, opened the boot of the car, and leaned in.

Diamond pressed a hand against the small of Julie's back. She started forward.

Sending in Julie first may have looked like cowardice, but it was not. While her sudden arrival on the scene caught Porterfield's attention, Diamond ducked around the other side of the Mercedes. Just in time, because Porterfield produced a knife from the car boot and swung it at Julie.

She swayed out of range and narrowly escaped another lunge. Then Diamond charged in and grabbed Porterfield from behind and thrust him sideways against the car, pinioning his arms. Julie prised the knife from his fist. Diamond produced a set of handcuffs, and between them they forced him over the boot and manacled him.

"Want to see what's in the cartons?" Diamond suggested to Julie over the groaning prisoner. "Why don't you use the knife?"

She cut along the adhesive seal of the top carton and parted the flaps. Neatly stacked inside were wads of French one-hundred-franc banknotes.

"Money?"

"Funny money," said Diamond. "We'll find the offset litho machine and the plates hidden deep inside the building. What

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with Serena's artwork, Glenn Noble's printing expertise, and these premises to work in, making counterfeit notes was a profitable scam. But just like you said, Trish got suspicious of all the late nights. Glenn hadn't dared tell her what he was up to, even though it helped their bank balance no end. She was too high-principled to be in on the secret."

"Why French money?" Julie asked.

"Easier to make. No metal strip. I don't know how good these forgeries are, but Glenn would have got his brother in Devon to make the paper with a passable watermark." He picked one up and held it to the light. "Not bad. A portrait of Glenn's favourite painter, Eugene Delacroix. This has a nice feel to it. They coat the printed notes with glycerine. He'll have handpressed the serial numbers."

"And why was he killed?"

"Because of Trish. Unwisely, he told Porterfield that she was asking about the late nights. She would have seen it as her moral duty to shop them all, and Porterfield couldn't risk her wheedling the truth out of Glenn." He hauled Porterfield upright. "You thought you could get rid of Glenn and do the printing yourself, didn't you, ratbag? Last Monday afternoon you called unexpectedly at the house. Glenn let you in, offered you a drink, and when his back was turned you drove a knife into him. You escaped through the back garden just as Trish was coming in through the front. Right?"

"How the hell did you get onto me?" Porterfield asked.

"Through something Glenn Noble wrote on a photograph. Someone took a picture of your day out in Minehead in 1993. Glenn wrote "wayzgoose" on the back."

"What's that?"

"A word for a printers' outing. When I looked at it first, I couldn't understand why he called it that, since he was the only printer in the picture. Then it dawned that you and possibly your wife were involved in some printing activity. When I saw how well you were doing, and how large his bank balance was, I reckoned you were printing money. Julie, would you call headquarters and ask them to send a car?"

Porterfield asked, "What was that word?"

"Wayzgoose," said Diamond. "Funny old word. Worth remembering. It'll get you a large score in Scrabble. Where you're going, you may get the odd chance to play. You'll certainly have the time."●

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QUEEN, TWO JACKS

by William Link

He suggested steaks at one of his favorite restaurants and was pleasantly surprised when she agreed.

The dinner was excellent, in an ambiance of wood paneling and attentive service; whether it was due to his company or the bottle of burgundy, she grew more relaxed and accessible. She certainly was good-looking, Roger decided: long dark hair, frank blue eyes, and a dressed-for-success tailored suit with an antique Victorian cameo pinned high on the collar of her blouse.

They wound up, quite naturally, at his apartment, which was only a block away. He poured after-dinner drinks and asked her if she cared to kick off her shoes, but she declined. While she sipped her brandy he took out a deck of cards.

William Link is probably best known to readers through his partnership with Richard Levinson and the many top-rated programs they created together for network television: *Colombo, Burke's Law,* and *Mannix,* to name a few. Levinson and Link's first published collaboration, however, was a story they wrote for *EQMM* in 1954 while they were both in college. The following is Mr. Link's second solo piece for us.

For almost an hour he dazzled her with all the tricks in his arsenal. Four-ace routines, mentalism, second and bottom deals, but not one "pick-a-card"—because he had found that they bored people.

Her eyes were sparkling and he knew it wasn't only the alcohol. "Do you do this for a living?" she asked. "Or is it just a hobby?"

"Just a hobby," he smiled. "But after a few tricks you'd be surprised how many mutual bonds I can sell."

"So just what are you selling me?" she asked flirtatiously.

Myself, he thought, but didn't say it.

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He demonstrated a few more tricks, ending with his pièce de résistance—a card with a torn corner is discovered in an ice tray in his fridge.

She was, undoubtedly, the most receptive audience he had ever had. She oh'd and ah'd like a small child on Christmas morning, and sometimes even clapped her hands in astonishment and delight. Finally he called it quits, knowing that in performing you should never wear out your welcome.

"That was marvelous, Roger. You should have your own television specials, like David Copperfield. Oh my lord!" She had glanced at the clock. "It's after twelve already. And I've got a class at eight!"

As he was helping her with her coat, she suddenly laughed.

"Something funny?"

"That's the strangest thing." She was pointing at a photograph in a silver frame on an end table. "I never heard of someone having a picture of himself."

Roger smiled, relieved. "That's not me."

"Not you? Of course it is. Is this another magic trick?"

"One of Mother Nature's. That's Philip. He's my identical twin."

She seemed intrigued by this. She picked up the frame, about to say something, but changed her mind. "Does he do card tricks too?"

"No. We're really quite different."

Surprisingly, or not so surprisingly, she kissed him goodnight.

They saw each other for the next seven nights. He told Philip about her on the phone.

"Sounds serious, little brother," Philip commented. "What's she doing hanging out with a weirdo like you?"

"She likes card tricks."

"Uh-huh. Well, I guess eccentrics attract eccentrics."

Philip had married in his sophomore year in college. He now had two children, a pit bull, and a faux-farmhouse in Westport. "When do I get to meet Ms. Less-than-a-full-deck?"

"Soon."

He proposed on the eighth evening and was immediately accepted. In a bubbling euphoria they almost danced their way back to his apartment where they spent the night again and where the next morning he showed her a new card trick at break-

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fast. On the way out she looked at Philip's photograph. "Sure he doesn't do card tricks?"

"No. Just practical jokes."

She made a face. "Those kind of people can be very sadistic."

"You'll love Philip."

The following night they returned to the restaurant where he'd proposed, the Lewd Mood, which was a mini-Mardi Gras of smoke and bodies. Rafael was delighted with the good news. He opened a bottle of champagne on the house and commandeered them the table that had become their own.

An hour or so later they were both on the giddy edge of inebriation. Roger removed his omnipresent deck of cards from their case but they seemed to stick to his fingers. Laughing, Page kissed him and excused herself to go to the ladies room. When she came back she rubbed her eyes, thinking either she was drunk or needed an eye examination. There were two Rogers floating before her, but only one held a deck of cards.

"This is my notorious brother Philip," Roger announced. It seemed Philip had called a number of Roger's haunts and Rafael had told him to hurry over.

Philip gripped Page's hand in both of his and kissed her on both cheeks, French-style. "You must be pretty damned special," he enthused, "if he's waited this long."

Page smiled confusedly, not knowing if he meant Roger was just patient or some kind of incipient nerd.

As usual, Philip launched into a nonstop monologue, with himself as the witty centerpiece of his stories, pausing only now and then to down a succession of Gibsons. Roger tuned out, studying him—it was like peering into a mirror, a fun-house mirror. If he closed his eyes, even the voice was the same, a trait, he had noticed, that was shared by other identical twins. Page was also staring at him, chin cupped on her palm, enthralled with his endless stream-of-consciousness jokes and tales.

Roger soon felt forgotten, left out. He reached over and covered Page's hand with his own. She didn't seem to notice.

"What are those?" Philip asked, indicating the deck of cards. "Don't tell me Roger's been showing you all his boring tricks."

"He's very good."

"Sure. You'd be good too if you shut out the world and stayed home every night practicing." He laughed and punched Roger on

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the shoulder. "Just kidding, bro. I don't know how you do half those things."

"Aren't you going to be late for your train?"

Philip grinned. "Is that a hint or something?"

Page hadn't taken her eyes from him. "Are you really identical?" she said, her voice slightly slurred. "I mean, in every way?"

"Every," Philip said and then laughed. "Except in the IQ department."

"Wait a minute," Roger said. "What about your tattoo?"

Page was fascinated. "Philip has a tattoo? Where?"

Philip tapped his left upper arm. "If this wasn't a public place I'd show you. I was in a fraternity in college—and one night all of us went down to the East Village to this tattoo parlor. I must've been bombed out of my skull."

Page felt his arm. "What kind of tattoo is it?"

"A heart pierced with a knife. The knife is blue and the heart, naturally, is red."

Her hand lingered on his biceps. Roger twisted his head away, looking for the waiter and the check.

"I'd like to remove the damn thing," Philip said. "I feel like I'm on shore leave or something."

"We'd better be going," Roger said. He squeezed Page's hand. "Don't you have an early class tomorrow?"

"No. After lunch."

Philip said, "I think you're trying to break up this party. Come on, let's have another round."

"Right, right," Page echoed. "One for the road. I mean, the street."

Roger didn't comment. His mouth was a tight, sullen line. The whole evening, what had been a cause for celebration, was ruined. When the new drinks arrived he pocketed his cards and decided to say nothing more for the rest of the night.

He was seized by insomnia. He lay rigid in bed, staring up at the dim light-show of reflected headlights on the ceiling. He had been prepared to beg off if Page wanted to spend the night at his apartment, but she hadn't even asked. And Philip kissed her goodnight before depositing her in a cab. On the mouth.

Damn him, Roger thought, still furious. Philip had never grown up; he was trapped in a time machine, the genial schoolyard bully, telling the latest dirty story, hiding a garter snake in his lunch

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box. How had his wife put up with him all these years? He saw Philip once a month at the most, but she had him home every night. Or did she? A friend had told him he had seen Philip in an out-of-the-way cocktail lounge with a very young, very sexy woman. But Roger gave him the benefit of the doubt; maybe he always needed a new audience for his stories.

He buried his head in the pillow. Just before he finally fell asleep he thought of the ultimate humiliation: Philip had to be the best man at his wedding.

The next day after work he called Page at her apartment. There was still time to pick out an engagement card before the engravers closed, but she was feeling out of sorts.

"It might be the flu coming on," she said. "There's an awful lot of that around."

He was disappointed, knotting the plastic phone cord around his wrist. "Get right in bed. I could bring some fresh lemons later and make you a hot toddy. Darling?"

"No. I'd better get some sleep."

When he called her the next morning there was no one there. At the school someone in the administration office said they weren't sure if she had come in or not.

He was in conference with a client late in the day when his secretary announced that his fiancée was on the phone.

"Are you feeling any better?" he asked.

Her voice sounded different. "Some. Could you come over?"

He hid his elation. "Of course, honey. Can I bring anything, some Chinese takeout, Tex-Mex . . .?"

"No. Just bring you."

There was still something strangely constrained in her voice, as if someone else was in the room. Odd. He had been to her apartment; he knew she didn't have a roommate. "I'll come straight from work," he said, but she had already hung up.

She lived in an ancient, moss-green building near the Hudson in the Eighties. There was a light brush of wind from the river and the streetlights seemed muted, like pale autumn trees starved for oxygen.

As soon as he entered the tiny dark lobby he felt anxious. On edge. He didn't believe in a sixth sense, the other five were faulty

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enough, but the hairs at the back of his neck were wired. He clutched the deck of cards in his pocket like a security blanket.

The elevator was a moving cave, half lit by a fifty-watt. After he rang the bell he waited almost a full minute before she opened the door.

Her appearance startled him: Her hair was loose, uncombed, tangled. She wore a kimono, figured with yellow blossoms like nuclear mushroom clouds. The gown was half open and he could see the smooth braless curve of her breasts.

He decided not to kiss her and she didn't seem to notice. He waited until she had closed the door before he said, "What's wrong?"

"Wrong? What do you mean?"

Her voice was still strange. He stalled for time while he took off his raincoat, folded and placed it neatly on the ottoman. "Why don't you tell me about it?"

Her eyes seemed dilated. Had she been drinking, smoking pot?

"Page," he said gently, "there's something not quite right. You don't seem yourself. What's going on?"

She hesitated, then nodded, suddenly resigned. "You're right."

"Can you talk about it?"

She nodded again. More hesitation. "I can't marry you."

"Can't?! What are you saying?"

"Something happened," she said shakily. "Something that changes things."

"What? Tell me."

"Last night. I wasn't sick. That was just an excuse so I didn't have to see you."

"Why?"

"Because—because I had a date with your brother. We went to bed."

He staggered back with a sharp pain in his chest. Her words hung like threatening knives in the air. He was looking down at the coffee table: magazines, ashtrays, an empty cup with a limp teabag on the saucer. And a photograph—a Polaroid. It showed a lasciviously grinning Philip, stark naked, the red-blue tattoo glowing on his arm like an exotic postage stamp.

She was aware of his shock, and his exploding anger. She leaned over quickly to take the offending photo when he caught her around the neck. She managed to choke out, "You don't under—!"

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He squeezed harder, her body squirming under thirty years of sibling rage and pain. Her face turned red, a boiling scarlet, her pupils bulging. He was amazed—it was like someone else's hands, squeezing, squeezing . . .

"Roger! For God's sake—!"

Philip stood in the doorway. His tie was loose, his vest unbuttoned, and he held a tumbler filled with ice and an amber liquid. He looked terror-stricken.

Roger let her slip to the floor behind the coffee table. His hands itched, the fingers slack with fatigue. Later, it seemed like minutes later, he saw through a wavering haze that Philip was kneeling down next to the body.

"My God," Philip said, "she's not breathing."

He said nothing. He rubbed his raw fingers.

"It was a joke, Philip. We were playing a practical joke on you. She had a key to the apartment and we thought—"

Roger heard his voice saying, "She wouldn't have played a joke on me. Not that kind. Page wasn't that kind of person."

"You're right," Philip said. "You still don't—" He broke off as they both heard a key scraping in the lock.

A moment later the door partially opened and Page looked in, frowning. "Roger," she said, surprised. "What are you doing here? Did the super let you in?"

He stared at her, speechless. It was like returning from a deep dream.

"Philip!" she said, again surprised. She still hadn't noticed the body behind the coffee table. "Did you play the joke, whatever it was?" She glanced back at Roger. "Why are you looking at me like that? Your brother said he wanted to play a joke on you—with my sister. He just met her this morning." She laughed. "I never told you. I was saving it as a surprise." She went to him, hugged and kissed him. "I'm just like you and Philip. I'm an identical twin. Now what was the joke?" ●

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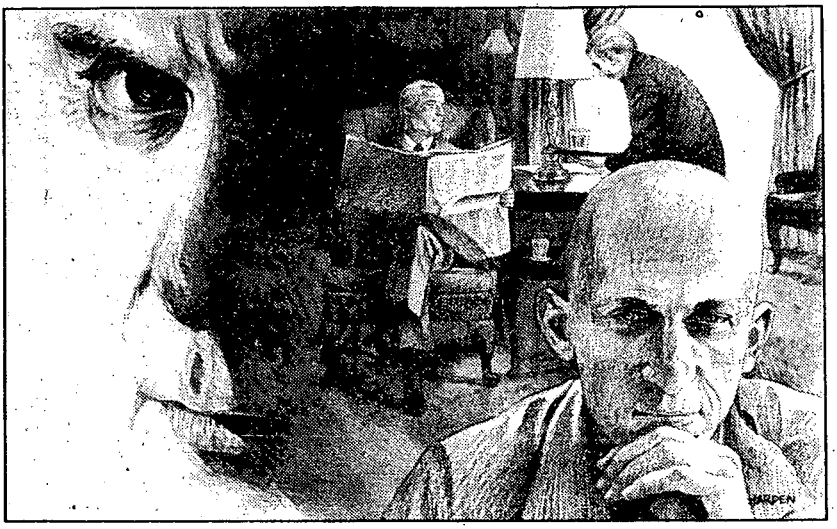

Art by Laurie Harden

THE OLD SPIES CLUB

by Edward D. Hoch

Brand had been retired from British Intelligence for a good many years, but it was not until he turned sixty that he was invited to join the Old Spies Club. That was not its official name, of course, but around London's clubland it was often called that, especially by nonmembers who may have been a bit jealous of its exclusive status and impressive membership.

The club itself occupied three floors of a late-Victorian building on St. James's Street, just a short walk from Piccadilly. The main floor was given over to the gentlemen's lounge and the dining room, with a billiard room, card room, smoking lounge, library, and the other amenities one might expect. On the second floor were rooms for meetings or private dinners, along with the club's offices. The third floor contained three dozen residential rooms where members might stay for a day or a year. These were often occupied by members in the city on a visit, although some mem-

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bers also found them useful when death or divorce suddenly changed their marital status.

Rand had taken a good deal of kidding from his wife Leila about being elderly enough for the Old Spies Club, and in truth he had never been much of a joiner. He was a bit dismayed the first time he took the train up from Reading and stopped in the place one warm July afternoon. The first person he met, just inside the door, was Colonel Cheever, a blustering old man who could have starred in any number of film comedies about the army. It was hard to imagine he'd ever been engaged in any sort of intelligence work.

Jeffrey Rand has been cracking cases in *EQMM* for more than 30 years. Had it been left up to Mr. Hoch, however, we would have known him as "Randolph." As Francis Nevins says: "He was renamed because *EQMM* editor Fred Dannay wanted a name subliminally evoking James Bond, even though there was nothing Bond-like about the stories"–not even these days!

"Rand! How are you, old chap? I saw your name come up on the new member postings. Good to have you aboard." His gray moustache drooped around his thick lips and he had a habit of spitting when he spoke quickly, but Rand had to admit he seemed trim and in good health for his age. Cheever had been in army intelligence, far from Rand's own sphere of activity. Their paths had only crossed a few times at government functions Rand couldn't avoid.

Now, in trying to be politely friendly, he asked Cheever, "Do you come here often, Colonel?"

"I'm here for the meeting at two o'clock. I expect you are too."

"No," Rand admitted. "I was just in the city for the day and thought I'd acquaint myself with the place."

Colonel Cheever smiled. "Let me give you the tour."

Rand admired the comfortable leather armchairs in the lounge, wondering if he'd ever be elderly enough to pass his afternoons in such a place. "The air in here used to be blue with cigar smoke," the colonel explained, "but now the smokers have been relegated to a smaller lounge down the hall. Times do change."

He led the way through the spacious billiard room and the card room, where green-shaded lights hung down over felt-covered tables.

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"I imagine there are some wicked card games in here," Rand commented.

"Wicked indeed! I prefer bridge, but most players like faster methods of losing their money."

The dining room, with its rows of neatly arranged tables, was quite inviting and Rand made a mental note to dine there sometime with Leila. When they'd reached the second-floor meeting rooms it was two o'clock, time for the colonel's meeting. Rand started to excuse himself but saw another familiar face among those entering the meeting room. "Harry! Harry Vestry!"

The slender smiling man turned at the sound of his name. "Well, if it isn't Rand! Good to see you, old chap. How long have you been gone from Concealed Communications now?"

"Too long, Harry. I'm old enough to qualify for this club, after all. And Double-C doesn't even exist anymore under that name."

Vestry chuckled. Rand had been a close friend of Vestry's when they were recruited together for intelligence work, but the vagaries of overseas assignments had separated them after a few years. "Look, why don't you sit in on our meeting, Rand? It's nothing really secret, and you may have some good suggestions to toss in."

"I don't even know what it's about," Rand protested mildly.

Vestry smoothed back his thinning gray hair. "Finding the truth, old chap. That's what it's about." Then, acknowledging Cheever for the first time, he urged, "Bring him along, Colonel. It's an open meeting."

Cheever placed a hand on Rand's shoulder. "You heard the man. Come along and join us."

There were a dozen of them around the long oval table, though seats had been provided for twice that number. Rand had already observed that, like most London clubs, this one had not yet progressed to admitting women. Harry Vestry took his place at the head of the table, ready to conduct the meeting, and it was obvious he'd been within his rights when he invited Rand to sit in. Looking around the table at the other men, all about his age or slightly older, Rand was surprised that he knew so few. Cheever and Vestry were the only two he could have named, though a tall man with a red face and a bald head like a bullet seemed familiar.

"I think we all know the purpose of this meeting," Vestry began when the others had quieted their conversations.

Rand raised his hand. "I'm afraid I don't."

"Of course, Jeffrey. I forgot. Well, you probably read in the

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papers last winter about the death of Cedric Barnes during heart surgery. He was the author of all those books on famous British spies, double agents, MI5, MI6, and Air Intelligence. I believe he even did a volume on Concealed Communications, your old department."

Rand remembered. He'd read it when it came out, feeling a perverted sense of pride when he found sixteen references to himself in the index. Even in a top-secret organization it was nice to achieve some level of recognition. Oddly enough, he'd thought of Cedric Barnes just a few days earlier, after reading a news account from America that stated that the CIA had agreed to stop employing journalists in the gathering of intelligence data. "I had lunch with the man once," Rand said. "He wanted an interview but it was forbidden by the Official Secrets Act. I don't know where he obtained all his information."

"It hardly matters now," Vestry said. "What matters is that his daughter Magda intends to auction off the furnishings from his country house. Barnes's wife has been dead about ten years, so everything went to the daughter. The auction is scheduled here in London next week, at Sotheby's. Many of us believe grave danger can be done to the country if that auction is allowed to go forward."

Rand was a bit surprised when he allowed his gaze to circle the table and saw that the others were taking this seriously. "Do you really think he had some top-secret papers hidden in a piano leg?"

"Such things are possible," the tall red-faced man said. "He worked at home with his daughter's help, and we already know certain well-placed journalists will be bidding on select pieces. A diary or journal could be invaluable."

Harry Vestry continued. "My proposal, gentlemen, is that we stop this auction by placing a preemptive bid for the entire offering. I have already spoken to Magda Barnes about the possibility and she is agreeable."

"How much does she want?" Colonel Cheever asked.

"One million pounds."

There were sighs and groans from around the table. "The club doesn't have that sort of money," someone said.

"We may be able to negotiate a lower figure," Vestry tried to reassure them. "But we must all realize the importance of this matter."

Rand spoke again. "If it's so important, why doesn't the government step in and take action?"

"We understand they have done all they can on an official

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basis," Vestry answered vaguely. Rand wondered if he was implying that the government had appealed to the Old Spies Club for financial backing in the matter.

It was Colonel Cheever who seemed most vocal in opposing Vestry. "Are you saying you expect the members in this room to come up with the million pounds necessary to cancel the auction? Such a suggestion borders on the ridiculous!"

Vestry tried to remain calm against this attack, but the members around the table quickly chose sides. After most of them had spoken, it seemed obvious he was in the minority. "The money just isn't there," the red-faced man said.

"Do you have any other suggestions, Shirley?" Vestry asked.

At first the use of the feminine name jarred Rand, but then something clicked in his memory. Shirley Watkins, the man with a woman's name. During his years of covert government service Shirley's job had always been assassination. Few knew his name and fewer still had seen his face. Rand had met him just once in Berlin, twenty years ago, but supposed him long dead. Could this possibly be the same man?

"Let me talk to the daughter," Shirley suggested. "Maybe I can make her see reason."

It might have been an innocent remark, but coming from this man it could also have been a death threat. Rand knew his imagination was running away with him but still he raised his hand and spoke. "If you'll excuse me, I wonder if I might be of service, gentlemen. As I said, I had lunch with Cedric Barnes a few years back when he wanted an interview for the Double-C book. His daughter might remember my name if she helped him with the book."

"That's very good of you, Rand," Colonel Cheever said at once. "What say you all? Shall we take Jeffrey up on his offer?"

There were assents from around the table, and perhaps a sense of relief. Rand wondered what he was getting himself into.

Sotheby's London auction rooms were located on New Bond Street, in a remodeled four-story building that probably dated from Georgian times. The building ran through the block to St. George Street, and the main entrance was around the back. It was here that Rand entered, stopping to purchase a pricey full-color catalogue of that week's lots to be auctioned. The one that interested him was titled simply *Items From the Country House of an Author and Journalist.*

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He went upstairs to the second-floor exhibition hall and spent the better part of the next hour inspecting an array of furniture including antique desks, chairs, tables, lamps, even a four-poster bed with a canopy. Barnes's old manual typewriter was there with a shiny new plastic ribbon in place. A pile of books, neatly tied in manageable bundles of twenty or so, was being sold as a separate lot. Glancing over the titles, Rand recognized some of the Cold War classics, plus a few books on espionage in general and World War II in particular. David Kahn's thick volume *The Code Breakers* was there, along with *Hitler's Spies,* and Robert Harris's recent novel *Enigma.* There was also a complete set of Cedric Barnes's own books, many in foreign-language editions, leaving little doubt as to the identity of the "author and journalist." An array of office supplies, a camera, and a tape recorder completed the lot.

Rand spent the rest of his time studying the others who roamed through the exhibition hall. One that he recognized at once was Simon Spalding, a columnist for the *Speculator.* He was an expert at digging up dirt on the Royal Family, and perhaps now he was widening his horizons.

On his way out Rand stopped in the office and requested a ticket to the auction itself. The young woman behind the desk informed him that no tickets were necessary. "Anyone may attend our regularly scheduled auctions," she said. "However, if you think you might be bidding you should register at the door and receive a numbered paddle which you hold up to signify a bid."

"I wonder if you could help me with one other matter. Could you put me in touch with a family member regarding this auction?"

Apparently she was accustomed to such requests. "You may place an early bid with us for any item you wish."

"This is more of a family matter," he said, purposely vague.

She glanced toward the closed door to an inner office. "Just a minute, please." She tapped lightly on the closed door and then entered.

After a moment she emerged with a dark-haired woman, perhaps in her middle thirties, wearing a bright summer dress that looked expensive to Rand's untrained eye. She smiled and extended her hand. "I'm Magda Barnes. The items to be auctioned are from my father's house. I came by today to see how they were being displayed. May I be of service?"

He accepted the hand, which was surprisingly soft. "Is there somewhere we could talk in private, Miss Barnes?"

"I was using their conference room to review the catalogue. Per-

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haps we could talk in there." She glanced at the secretary, who nodded permission.

Inside the small room Rand introduced himself and came right to the point. "Your father was a respected journalist. I met him once and you may recall I was mentioned several times in his book on the Department of Concealed Communications. Some of us, now retired from the Service, are concerned that your father's possessions might contain some hidden notes that could fall into the wrong hands."

She smiled at the thought. "No, no—I've been over everything being offered at auction. I examined and searched each item at least twice. There are no hidden notes or journals. All his personal papers and manuscripts will be given to Cambridge University."

"Miss Barnes, the feeling is that he might have come into possession of material he could not publish under the Official Secrets Act. Do you know what he was working on at the time of his death?"

The smile faded as she began to comprehend the people he represented. "Did that man Vestry send you?"

"I have spoken with Harry Vestry. He did not send me."

"He knows my price."

"One million pounds is beyond our resources."

"Then the auction will go on as planned, even though I realize I won't come close to that figure. Men like Vestry fought my father all his life. I owe him nothing."

"When I was looking over the items just now I spotted a familiar face. Simon Spalding. You certainly don't owe him anything."

The news didn't seem to bother her. "He knew my father years ago. I remember him visiting the house once around the time of Sadat's assassination. It's not surprising he'd be interested in the exhibition. Perhaps he might even bid on something."

"Has he approached you about any particular piece?"

"No." She stood up from the table and said, "I really must be going, Mr. Rand. We have nothing further to discuss. Tell Harry Vestry the auction will go on as planned."

He sighed and left the room after a few polite words. Then he went downstairs into the warm July afternoon. He'd walked about a block when someone fell into step beside him. It was the bullet-headed former assassin, Shirley Watkins. "Didn't do so well, did you, Mr. Rand? I could have told you that. She's the sort of woman needs a little fright before she sees reason."

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The following morning, as she was leaving to deliver one of her summer lectures on Egyptian archeology at Reading University, Rand told Leila he'd be going into London again. "Two days in a row?" she asked, somewhat surprised.

"Maybe three. There's an auction at Sotheby's tomorrow that I should attend. It's part of Cedric Barnes's estate, the fellow who wrote those insider books about British Intelligence."

"I hope you're not going to buy anything."

"I'll try not to," he said with a grin.

This time only three of them were in the meeting room on the second floor of the Old Spies Club. Vestry and Colonel Cheever listened intently as Rand told them what had transpired the previous afternoon. "When I suggested contacting Magda Barnes I had no idea that Shirley would be dogging my steps. Did one of you send him after me?"

"Hardly, old boy," Cheever answered. "You know Shirley. He has a mind of his own."

"Look, the auction is taking place tomorrow morning. Shirley can't stop it. You can't allow him to threaten that woman in any manner."

"Nothing could be further from our minds," Vestry assured him.

"We're out of the game now, retired. I don't break codes anymore and Shirley Watkins doesn't kill people. Is that understood?"

Colonel Cheever snorted. "I doubt that he ever did kill people. It was probably all a scare campaign to intimidate the other side."

"Maybe he started believing the campaign himself. He spoke of Barnes's daughter needing a little fright to see reason. I told him to leave her alone."

"Did you look over the auction items?" Vestry asked. "Any likely hiding places for notes or a journal?"

"A desk or coffee table could have a hidden drawer or a false bottom. If it's on microfilm or a microdot the possibilities are endless." Rand decided it was time to bring things out in the open. "Look here, there's something about this whole business you're not telling me. You talk of spending upwards of a million pounds, of threatening Barnes's daughter, of keeping the press away. From what? What's in this journal that makes it so valuable?"

Vestry maintained an uneasy silence until Colonel Cheever started to speak. Then he interupted to say, "You might as well know, Rand. Rumor has it that Cedric Barnes once interviewed a double agent, someone working for us who was on the verge of

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defecting to Moscow. This was to be the man's swan song, his public rationale for his actions, not to be published until he was safely out of the country."

"And—?"

"And at the last moment something changed. The double agent never defected, and Cedric Barnes kept his word. He never published the interview."

"How long ago is this supposed to have happened?" Rand asked.

Harry Vestry shrugged. "In some versions it was 1985. Other versions have it way back in the seventies when Barnes was still a relatively young man. Your guess is as good as mine."

"And yet the dozen men around this table yesterday all believe it happened. Not only that, they believe the interview still exists somewhere. Why would Barnes keep it all these years? Why not simply destroy it?"

"Unfortunately, he was a newspaperman," the slender man answered. "I imagine he kept it all these years on the off chance that the man might defect after all. The Cold War ended, the Berlin Wall came down, and still he kept it."

"You have no way of knowing that with any certainty," Rand pointed out.

"Simon Spalding knows it, and he's after the journal."

Someone else knew it too, Rand suddenly realized. The man who had given the interview. Naturally he would have begged Barnes to destroy it after he decided to remain in England. Naturally he would suspect it was still in existence. He would have been most anxious to keep it out of Spalding's hands.

Rand found himself asking the obvious question. "Which of the club members first brought up this matter? Who was it that wanted the auction stopped?"

Colonel Cheever answered. "We'd all heard the rumors, of course. They say Barnes dropped hints himself on nights when he'd had a few too many brandies. When the auction was announced, several of us were concerned. I suppose Harry and I took the lead in it, but it was Shirley who talked it up and arranged for the meeting. He claimed to have two dozen of the old boys, but as you saw, only half that number really appeared when the time came."

"Eleven of us, really," Vestry corrected. "Rand was an addition, you'll remember. I'd say you and I and Shirley were the organizers. The other eight were lukewarm to the idea."

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"Could you give me a list of their names?"

"What in heaven's name for?" Vestry still possessed the field agent's reluctance to commit anything to paper.

"If there's any truth to the rumors, the mysterious double agent could be retired now. He could even be a member of this club. If so, he would have been especially interested in attending your meeting yesterday."

"Nonsense!" Cheever blustered. "I've known these people for most of my life. I'd vouch for any of them."

Rand ignored him and asked Vestry, "Where can I find Shirley Watkins?"

The slim man considered his question. "If he's not here he's most likely at the Moon and Stars. It's a pub down by the river, near Canary Wharf."

The two worlds of Shirley Watkins were vastly different from one another. The quiet luxury of the Old Spies Club was only some eight kilometers from the Moon and Stars Pub at Canary Wharf, but they were separated by more than distance. Once a haven for seamen off the nearby docks, now it was a meeting place for office workers from the tallest building in England. Even a recent IRA bombing had done little to frighten people out of the area. On this summer Wednesday the place was crowded and the aroma of beer mixed with a haze of cigarette smoke.

Rand spotted Shirley Watkins at once, seated in a booth with a middle-aged woman wearing too much makeup. He had on a suit and tie, and his bald bullet head seemed to reflect the overhead lights as he drank from a pint of stout. A decade or so older than the other male customers, he could still have been an executive from one of the Canary Wharf firms. When he saw Rand heading for him he told the woman, "Here's business. I'll talk to you later." She gave Rand a sour look and exited the booth.

Rand slipped in to take her place. "I want to speak with you about the auction," he began.

Shirley eyed him, sizing him up. "How'd you find me?"

"Harry Vestry said you might be here."

"Yeah, Harry. I think he still spies on all of us, just to keep his hand in."

"Did you take my advice about Magda Barnes and stay away from her?"

He held up his hands in a gesture of surrender. "Whatever

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you say is fine with me. I was always one for obeying orders."

Rand deliberately avoided making eye contact, fearing he might detect a touch of irony in the words. "I was talking with Vestry and the colonel this afternoon. They told me about the rumors."

"What rumors?"

"The interview that Barnes is supposed to have done with a double agent before he defected."

"Yeah, that." Shirley Watkins downed the rest of his pint. "Do you believe any of it?"

"I don't know. I heard it for the first time about an hour ago."

"Well, I've got my doubts, but I'll do whatever they want."

Rand frowned at the words. "What do you mean by that?" he started to ask, then cut himself short. Another familiar face had just entered the Moon and Stars.

"What's the matter, Rand?"

"That reporter Spalding just came in. He must have followed me."

"Say the word and he'll be feeding the fishes."

Rand gave a dry chuckle. "Did you ever in your life really kill anyone, Shirley, or has it all been an act?"

"I've done my part."

"Haven't we all?" He slid out of the booth. "I'd better go talk to Spalding."

The columnist was nursing a half-pint, trying to avoid looking in the direction of the booth, when Rand joined him. "You're Simon Spalding, aren't you? I don't think we've ever been formally introduced. I'm Jeffrey Rand."

Spalding was a slender man in his early fifties with thinning brown hair and a crooked nose that might have been broken in his youth. "Oh yes. One of the retired spies. There are a great many of you around these days, aren't there? You must have hated to see the Cold War end."

Rand already knew from Spalding's columns that he didn't particularly like the man. "I retired from the Service long before the end of the Cold War," he said, and then asked, "Were you a friend of Cedric Barnes? I saw you at Sotheby's yesterday."

Spalding shrugged. "A fellow journalist. I was interested in what was being offered. I only met him once, at some awards dinner."

"I suppose his daughter has already removed anything of special value."

He shot Rand a glance that seemed an unspoken question. "We

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don't know that. Sometimes people have clever hiding places for their valuables. They even sell fake beer cans now so you can hide your money and jewelry in the fridge."

"Good idea, so long as the thief doesn't have a thirst. I gather you'll be at the auction tomorrow morning?"

"Sure. I'd like to pick up a souvenir of the old guy."

"There are legends about him, about the stories he didn't publish."

Simon Spalding laughed. He was warming a little toward Rand. "We all have stories that don't get published for one reason or another, same as you blokes. I remember back in nineteen eighty-one when the *Speculator* took me off the European desk and gave me the column to write, I passed along some great story leads to my successor but nothing ever happened."

"Tell me something, just between us," Rand said with a smile. "Who are you following this evening—me or Shirley?"

"They say that man is a government-authorized assassin."

"Does he look like one?"

"Damn right he does!"

"Then he's probably not. Not anymore, certainly. He's retired, same as the rest of us."

A sly look came over the columnist's face. "Member of the Old Spies Club, is he?"

"What's that?"

"The place on St. James's Street where you all go. That's what they call it, don't they? I'd do a column about it if I wasn't afraid of getting sued."

"Stick to the Royal Family," Rand advised. "It's safer."

He moved away from the bar and headed for the door, waving goodbye to Shirley Watkins.

Rand had to catch the early train into London for the auction the following morning. He was up before Leila because he wanted to clean and oil the little Beretta pistol he hadn't fired in years. Just seeing him with it would have upset her, he knew. But catching sight of himself in a mirror, he realized how foolish he looked. He was too old for these things. Deadly weapons were not for Sotheby's, and certainly not for the Old Spies Club.

The first familiar face he saw as he entered the auction house and registered for his plastic paddle was Harry Vestry, standing near the door and glancing at his watch. "I was hoping you'd be

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here, Rand." He glanced at Rand's paddle. "Number Seventy-seven! Sure to be lucky if you care to bid. If Cheever and Watkins get here too, I'd like to position us in different parts of the hall where we can keep track of the bidding. I know it's often impossible to identify the high bidder, especially if it's made by phone, but we can try."

Still playing the old spy, Rand thought. "Simon Spalding is sure to be here, bidding on something. I'll keep an eye on him."

"Good! I saw him go in a few minutes ago. He took a paddle, so he plans to bid."

But when Rand entered the large high-ceilinged auction room with its twin chandeliers and rows of folding chairs, the first person he saw was Magda Barnes, immaculate in a white summer suit. "We meet again, Mr. Rand."

"So it seems."

"Will you be bidding on any of my father's items?"

"I may." He lifted number seventy-seven and gave it a little twirl. "Good luck! You have a nice crowd." Then he went off to find a seat.

The auction had already started and they were on the fifth item. Rand estimated there were about a hundred and fifty people in the room. Some, apparently the high bidders, were in glass booths above floor level. They seemed to be connected by telephone to their agents on the floor. Above the stage where the auctioneer stood, a large electronic sign gave the latest bids in pounds sterling, dollars, francs, yen, and other currencies. As each item was announced for bidding it was shown on a turntable next to the auctioneer. Spotters along each side of the room watched for bids that the auctioneer might miss.

Rand could see that the prices were running fairly high for the antique items. Personal items and office supplies brought less, although Simon Spalding, seated a few rows ahead of Rand, paid two hundred pounds for Barnes's old manual typewriter. Rand was surprised when Colonel Cheever suddenly appeared, raising his paddle from a back row to bid on the collection of books. The bidding was lively but Cheever finally lost out.

The canopied four-poster bed, too large for the turntable, was wheeled onto the stage. It went to a dark-complexioned man who may have been an Arab. Barnes's writing desk fetched a good sum from a neatly dressed young couple.

Finally Rand spotted Shirley seated on the aisle near the rear. He held a plastic paddle with the number sixty-eight on it. That

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probably meant he'd come in before Rand, yet Harry Vestry at the door hadn't noticed him. It signified nothing, of course. Vestry might have stopped in the men's room for a moment.

The collection of Cedric Barnes's own books, in various languages, was the last item to be auctioned. This time Colonel Cheever tried again, with better results. He took the lot for eleven hundred pounds.

Several of the winning bidders went to the office to settle up and claim the items if they were small enough to carry. Rand was on his way out when he ran into Simon Spalding at the St. George Street entrance. "Did you bid on anything?" the columnist asked.

"Not a thing. But I see you picked up that old typewriter."

Spalding hefted it in its leather carrying case. "It's worth about a tenth of what I paid, but I wanted a remembrance of the old guy. He was one of the tops in the business."

Rand smiled in agreement. "He certainly was that." He glanced at his watch. "Look here, Spalding, it's nearly one o'clock. We both could stand a spot of lunch. The Old Spies Club, as you referred to it, is only a few blocks away, just across Piccadilly. Come along with me and I'll treat you."

Spalding quickly accepted. "That's very generous of you, Rand. I'll admit to being curious about the place."

As they entered the club, he suggested that Spalding might want to leave the typewriter in the checkroom, but the columnist clutched it firmly. "Oh no! This cost me two hundred pounds and I'm hanging onto it."

Rand chuckled and led the way into the dining room. After a luncheon of roast beef and blood pudding, topped with red wine and finished off with trifle for dessert, Spalding took out a cigar and they adjourned to the gentlemen's smoking lounge. It was deserted at this hour of the afternoon except for one man sleeping in an armchair, his bald head visible over its top. The columnist lit his cigar, offering one to Rand, who declined. Then they settled back in the comfort of the overstuffed leather armchairs.

"I can see why you chaps like this place," Spalding said. "It's a perfect setting to wile away one's retirement."

Rand smiled slightly. "Now that we're comfortable, suppose you show me the typewriter."

"What? This thing?"

"The very same."

"What for?"

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"So I can confirm my suspicion as to the identity of the fabled double agent."

Simon Spalding laughed. "You think this old manual typewriter of Barnes's will tell you that?"

"I know it will, and so do you. Who ever saw a shiny plastic ribbon on a manual typewriter? They all used fabric ribbons." He reached down and upzipped the leather carrying case. The columnist made no attempt to stop him. "It's a bit narrower than the quarter-inch plastic ribbons that electric typewriters use. There was all this talk of a journal, but Cedric Barnes used a tape recorder for interviews, didn't he? They even auctioned one off today." Rand removed the ribbon from the machine. "It's a tape, masquerading as a typewriter ribbon. The tape of Barnes's infamous last interview with the double agent."

"It's going to make me a rich man," Simon Spalding said.

"Or a dead one. Suppose I get a machine and we play this tape right now."

"Here?"

"We're alone except for that fellow sleeping in his chair. We won't disturb him. Don't you want to know the size of the fish you've landed?"

"I'd rather find out back in the office."

"Funny thing," Rand said, keeping his voice light. "You told me yesterday you only met Cedric Barnes once, at an awards dinner. But his daughter said you were at their house back around the time of Sadat's assassination. That would have been nineteen eighty-one, wouldn't it?"

"You have a better memory for dates than I do."

"There were rumors about Barnes's unpublished interview with a double agent, a defector who changed his mind at the last minute. Rumors of a journal Barnes kept of the interview. Only Barnes didn't keep journals, he used a tape recorder. One person would have known that for sure, would have known exactly what to look for among the items to be auctioned, would have spotted that recording tape disguised as a typewriter ribbon. The man Barnes interviewed, the double agent himself."

"Damn you, Rand!"

"If I'm wrong, play the tape for me."

Spalding's hand came out of his pocket holding a small automatic pistol. Rand remembered his own gun and wished now that he'd brought it.

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"I'm a journalist, remember, not one of you spy boys!"

"You don't look much like a journalist with that gun. I suppose the British and Russians used journalists occasionally, just as the CIA is sometimes accused of doing. Your job on the European desk was the perfect place to gather information. As for that interview, a journalist would be the most aware of a good news story, and the most likely to tell Barnes his side of the story before he defected."

Simon Spalding held the gun very steady. Behind him, Rand thought he could hear the sound of the bald man snoring. "If what you say is true, why would I change my mind after giving Barnes the interview?"

"Because the *Speculator* gave you a column."

His face had become a frozen mask. "How could you know that?"

"Magda Barnes remembers you at the house in nineteen eighty-one, around the time of Sadat's assassination. You told me last evening they took you off the European desk and gave you the column in eighty-one. Did you desert Communism for a newspaper column, Simon?"

"That's what Barnes asked me! I should have killed him before his tongue got loose and he started those rumors. I thought I'd put it all behind me, especially after the collapse of the Soviet Union."

Rand reached out his hand. "Give me the gun. It's much too late in the game to be shooting people."

Spalding raised the pistol, to fire or to surrender it. Rand would never know which. There was a low cough from behind the man's chair and a flower of blood burst from his chest. His head went back and he lay there dead.

The bald man was Shirley Watkins, and the silenced pistol was out of sight before Rand ever saw it. "Thought you might need help," he said. "Hated to put a hole through the chair, though."

"You were already here when we entered," Rand protested.

"Saw him waving his cigar around the dining room. Knew you'd head this way."

Rand stared at the body, and then at Shirley. "You really are an assassin."

"I was once, in my younger days."

"What do we do now?"

"Forget it ever happened. I'll handle everything. If that tape is what you say, the whole thing will be hushed up. This is the Old Spies Club, remember?"

Rand caught the evening train home. ●

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Art by Laurie Harden

THE FURNACE MAN

by Perri O'Shaughnessy

Mrs. Rodriguez had her hand on the doorknob and had just swung her purse to her shoulder when the phone rang. She considered leaving it for the machine. But couldn't it be Geraldo, calling to tell her he was sorry? In spite of the unlikelihood of it being Geraldo, who didn't operate that way, who generally fumed for a few days, then brought her flowers, but never ever admitted any wrongdoing, she ran back into the kitchen and picked up the portable phone, out of breath.

"Uh, hello, Mrs. Rodriguez. This is Clean-So-Well Heating and Plumbing. How are you today?"

She was disappointed. You like to think a man can grow and learn. Why should she always be the one to make peace? She did a fine job running the house, and if once in a while she blew the budget, well, that was life. Something of a crapshoot. But her husband didn't agree. He disliked uncertainty, and even more, debt. So they

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couldn't pay off the card this one month. How frivolous was it for her to buy some clothes she needed, and the kids needed, that they could afford, that they could pay back next month out of his raise?

She heard the breathing of the man on the other end of the phone. She never knew what to say to these strangers who called. Was there some polite way to tell them to get lost? "Fine," she said, stalling.

"We have a sale on. We'll inspect and clean your furnace and your ventilation system for sixty dollars off this month."

With two thrillers and several short stories to their credit, sisters Pamela and Mary O'Shaughnessy are fast becoming one of the most successful duos in crime fiction. Their second novel featuring attorney Nina Reilly, *Invasion of Privacy* (Delacorte), came out last August at the same time the paperback of their first book was launched with a huge first printing. Their first fiction was published in *EQMM*.

The house had central heating, and she vaguely recalled a furnace in the basement. She supposed these things required maintenance. In their five years in this house she could not recall any occasion when they'd had the system cleaned. This was their first real home, and she'd talked Geraldo into buying it against his instincts, back when he would still cave in to her sometimes. How she loved it, with the red geraniums in window boxes outside her kitchen window, and three perfect bedrooms, one peach, one blue, and one pink; with its white see-through curtains in the living room and the worn golden maple of her mother's dining set. Probably, they ought to try to keep the air fresh during cold weather, when all the doors and windows would be closed.

"Time to think about cranking that thing up for winter, wouldn't you say?" the furnace man went on. He had an unusual voice, nasal and unpleasant, almost funny if it wasn't for his deadpan delivery.

"Well, I don't know." She was acutely aware that her mother was waiting for her. Wednesday was grocery day, and she always took her mother to the shops to help her get what she needed. She always did her best for everyone. Why couldn't Geraldo see all that she did to make everything nice and homey for all of them? She

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would do anything for her family, anything.

"You know how dusty the vents get," he said as if she hadn't spoken. "There's fire danger, of course. We'll replace the filter as part of the service."

She felt helpless in the grip of such certainty. This was exactly how it went with Geraldo. He would bully and insist. She would give in, because most things weren't worth fighting about. And she only got her way if she was willing to put up with the flak that followed any decisions she made without his sanction. "I'll think about it," she said.

"Why don't I call you again in a week or two, then?"

"Whatever," she said, hanging up with relief, practically running out the door.

Two weeks later, she returned from her shopping trip with her mother exhausted, made a pot of coffee, and sat down with the morning paper to give herself a break before the kids got home from school. Her mother had been really aggravating that morning. Physically a very large and intimidating woman, she had lost the good humor she used to have, and was awfully cranky and difficult on these outings.

Today, she had jumped on a grocery boy for the way he stacked the cans up too high for her to reach. When he shrugged in answer, she pulled a can out of the middle of the stack, sending the green beans rolling around the floor, stepping neatly out of the way herself while the boy took a few on the legs. Really, it was a sight, Elena thought, able to laugh a little now, all those dented cans rolling up the aisles towards the other outraged shoppers. Her crafty mother had run to the boy full of charm and gracious apologies, a game she played to keep people off balance and off her case. By the time they left, the manager was thrusting free canned foods into their bags.

Her mother's policy was: Do whatever you have to do to get what you want.

She sipped her coffee, worrying about Geraldo. He had come home late the night before, as he had for the last several weeks, ever since that big blowup about money. This time, there had been no flowers. And now she had the hassle of knowing the credit-card bill would be coming again, maybe today, and he would see more charges there that they could not pay. She didn't understand it.

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She did everything she could to keep things going right. How could it all be going so wrong?

Her job was to keep the household in order. He didn't understand or appreciate what that involved, no man did. How could you clean windows without paper towels? How could you eat without napkins? He suggested rags, like his mother had used, and cloth towels, which needed laundering, soap, and more time she felt she didn't have to devote to such a level of trivia. He wanted her to be at home with the kids, he said, but they couldn't afford it now that the kids were in school. He kept mentioning how their neighbor Rosa had found a job at the unemployment department, like he wanted her to do that. As if she could possibly hold a job now, doing what, working as a secretary again for low wages with some jerk boss, and then come home and keep everything organized with three little kids? He was dreaming!

Who would get the clothes clean, the beds made, the groceries bought, the house tidy, the record-keeping done, the phone calls made? Who would be here when the kids got home, when the cable repair people came, or the washing machine repair people, or the package-delivery people? Who would make sure they all ate fresh-cooked, healthy foods, and make good lunches to take to school? Who would make breakfast, with her up and running to get out the door when he did every morning? Geraldo? She didn't think so. She hopped up, heading back into the kitchen to rinse out the pot and figure out what to give the kids for a snack, when the phone rang.

"Mrs. Rodriguez? Fare-Thee-Well Plumbing and Heating here. I talked with you a couple of weeks ago about cleaning your furnace, and you asked me to call back and remind you."

She instantly recognized the voice. But could she possibly have asked this man to call back? They couldn't afford to have the furnace cleaned.

"You'll save money on your heating bills because your furnace will run more efficiently with a new filter," the horrible voice continued, sounding like Pee-Wee Herman, exaggeratedly insinuating. How did he know what she had been thinking at that exact moment? It was eerie. If only Geraldo were as tuned in to her thoughts.

She giggled.

"When was the last time you had your furnace cleaned?"

She had no idea. Probably never. But if she admitted it to this

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man, he would have her where he wanted her. "Recently," she said firmly.

"This is something you should do every year," he said as firmly.

"I'll have to talk to my husband," she said, mad at herself the second she spoke the words. She hated women who resorted to this old cop-out! As if she couldn't decide whether to have the stupid furnace cleaned if she wanted to.

But here was an excuse that always worked with men. "I'll call back then," he said.

"No, don't!" she cried into the empty phone.

That night, for the first time since they had gotten married, Geraldo didn't come home at all.

"Mrs. Rodriguez? How you doing? Do-Well Heating and Plumbing here. You wanted me to call so that we could schedule a time to clean your furnace and ventilating systems."

He had awakened her. It was the middle of the afternoon, rainy and gray outside. The kids were going to after-school sports, so they would be having dinner late. She hadn't been sleeping well since this trouble with Geraldo, so she had put her head down for just a minute after washing the kitchen and bathroom floors.

She had been dreaming about something—oh yes. In her dream, they lived in a house surrounded by green hills, with church steeples in the distance, like a picture out of her youngest son's fairy-tale books. She had found an extra room in this dream house, a room just for her, where she could keep her things. She had been gathering her things when he called, her photographs, the little desk where she kept her bookkeeping and coupons tucked, a comfy armchair. A large picture window in the room looked out into the distant half-green, half-blue landscape. If she could just get all her things in there, into this haven of peace and isolation, everything would be all right again. . . .

"Have you talked to your husband yet?" he asked.

His affected voice had taken on a new, familiar tone, as if he was inquiring as a friend.

"No," she said, still not quite awake enough to tackle him straight on. She sat up, rubbing her eyes, throwing the sheet off her legs. "I forgot." She stifled an idiotic impulse to apologize.

"I'll call again," the man said. "How about next week?"

"Look, why don't you give me your number and I'll call you."

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"You can't call me," he said. "I'm on the phone all day. So I'll just give you a call . . ."

"Don't call back!" she said quickly, before he could hang up, before they had a plan together.

"Well, now, why is that, Mrs. Rodriguez?" the voice said, hurt.

The nerve!

"Goodbye!" she said, hanging up the phone. She fell back onto the pillows and pulled the sheet and then the comforter up around her, mad that such a nice dream had been interrupted like that. Didn't these people realize you had a life outside of their problems? From his point of view, she was this lazy good-for-nothing housewife who had nothing better to do than spend all her time considering what else needed doing to perfect this house that took all her time already and was eating them up with its needs and its extravagances!

Was it her fault the roof leaked? Was it her fault mice had crept into the basement and were nesting in the old dryer down there? And heating cost so much? Was it all her fault they had three children who needed a safe, warm house, clothing, food, books, and a father once in a while?

She couldn't get back to sleep. Combing her hair, she stared into the mirror at the face of a woman she barely recognized. She had gained a lot of weight since they had married. Diets didn't seem to help. Age had taken the soft prettiness Geraldo had once loved in her and left a middle-aged lady with hard lines around the eyes and mouth, in a housecoat in the middle of the day, hardly able to get out of bed. Geraldo had noticed and judged.

Funny how he remained so possessive of her, quite jealous of men on the street who caught her eye, cockadoodling like a rooster if she even once looked back. Old habit, she guessed. He could get really angry and impossible, irrational even, on the topic of other men, so she was always very careful not to trample his male ego. Yet here he was anyway, slipping away from her.

She could get him back. Rallying, she put on some tights and a big clean T-shirt. She would hop on the exercycle. She had just enough time before the kids got home.

Propping a book on a stand near the stationary bike, she began pedaling. She pedaled hard, so that the sweat broke out on her forehead and ran down her face. With one hand, she picked up the book, turning the pages as she finished, skimming, mostly absorbed in the workout her body was getting. Geraldo deserved

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something better from her, a better devotion. She knew it. She loved him and she was making him unhappy. She needed to work harder, do better. He had taken her checkbook away that morning, and her credit card, and left her with just a little cash. She had resented it, yes, but she would rise above it, not letting this petty garbage get between them.

Sweating, pedaling, breathing hard, she resolved to work off the extra pounds, keep the house cleaner, even scrub the damn toilet bowls more often, and quit spending extra money he didn't think they could afford, even if she disagreed. It wasn't worth losing her marriage just because he was a skinflint in some ways and nagged her so much about her spending habits. He was a good father, the best, and had always been an attentive husband until recently. She would promise him no more wastefulness, no more frivolity, and stick to the bargain.

She didn't think there was another woman in the picture yet. She still had time to work things out with him.

She would get the kids to bed early tonight, put on a pretty negligee and perfume. She would show him she remembered how to be a wife to him, in every way.

She had answered the door without hesitation, thinking Geraldo must have misplaced his key. A strange man in a uniform with an emblem sewn above his pocket stood on the porch, staring at her nightie.

"Mrs. Rodriguez," he said. "It's so good to meet you in person."

She knew the voice, but couldn't place it. Aware of the darkness outside, the hour, and the skimpiness of her clothes, she tried to close the door, but the man had a toe in the way.

"I'm here to clean the furnace," he said. "You made an appointment with me for tonight." She couldn't see him too well on the porch, but what she could see matched the voice: a pockmarked face, a short body, a certain twist to the trunk that suggested something not quite right with his posture.

Had she made an arrangement with this man? She had drunk a few glasses of wine that evening, waiting for Geraldo, quite a few glasses, and those phone calls just weren't all that important. She couldn't remember exactly what she had said. She got a lot of calls from solicitors, and at the moment she had a headache and a certain amount of blurriness.

"This is a bad time," she said.

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"I'll have to charge you seventy-five dollars for a house call whether I clean the furnace or not at this point, Mrs. Rodriguez. It'll only take fifteen minutes. Might as well let me do my job."

Seventy-five dollars! For fifteen minutes of work! Geraldo would kill her! Lost in her thoughts, trying to figure out a way to make this whole thing palatable to her husband, who should be home any moment, she let the little man in.

He brought some tools in a canvas plumber's bag. With a long vacuum hose he picked up dirt and lots of clinky bits of debris from the vents in each room, snaking the hose a long way down, except for in the children's bedrooms, even though, as he said, those might be the dirtiest. Kids stuck all kinds of things down there. But she didn't want him to wake them up.

Then he needed to get into the basement. Geraldo insisted that she unlock the basement for workers, and never give out the key to anyone. To get there, they had to go out the back door and down a steep hill alongside the house to a half-size door that led underneath. She put some shoes on, and turned on the outside lights while he waited, watching her. She pulled a jacket on over the wispy nightgown she was wearing, tucking her wallet into its pocket, and led him outside. She wasn't letting him back in the house.

He followed her down the steep hill, slipping and sliding in the mud. She had trouble with the key; it took forever to get the door open. The cold night air worked on her and, suddenly clear-headed, she remembered the phone call. She hadn't told the furnace man to come at all.

He followed her through the door.

She flipped the light on by the door, exposing the dirt floor of a hillside basement, and showed him where the furnace was, in the farthest corner, while she tried to think about what she should do now he was here and had already done some of the work. He fiddled with the furnace for a couple of minutes, maybe five total, and announced that he was done.

"You said you would replace the filter," she said. "I didn't see any filter."

"I don't have the right size. Anyway, yours is in good shape. You don't need a new one."

She hadn't needed to have the furnace cleaned, either. And she could as easily have vacuumed the vents herself.

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"I'm not going to pay you," she said. "You didn't do anything. And I didn't ask you to come here tonight."

"Oh, but you did, Mrs. Rodriguez," he said, coming close enough so that she could smell the alcohol on his breath. Maybe he could smell hers, too. "You wanted me to come. And now you owe me."

"I'm not going to pay," she said. She took a step back. Her foot caught on a box, and she started to fall. The furnace man caught her in his arms, one hand still clinging to a heavy wrench that she had never once seen him use.

She pulled away, shaking him off like dirt.

"Where's your husband tonight, Mrs. Rodriguez? Working late, huh?" He blinked brown eyes as solid and impassive-looking as wooden plugs. "He'll pay if you don't. I'll just wait with you for him to come home and we'll tell him all about it."

She was walking toward the basement door, with him following a few steps behind. She whirled to face him. "We're not going to pay! I never asked you to do anything!"

"Look at it from my point of view," he said, taking that wheedling tack that she just hated. "You have this nice house in a nice neighborhood. I come and do some work for you; I expect to get paid. Is that so hard to understand? Don't tell me you can't afford it. Not too many women can stay home these days, but you do. You're home all day, aren't you? Plenty of time to take a little nap, get out some frozen food for dinner real quick before everyone comes home. It's a nice setup."

"What do you know about me? You don't know me at all."

He laughed, and the sound sent a chill up her bare legs. "I know enough. You had a dirty furnace and I cleaned it. Now you owe me money." All in that nasty voice of his . . .

"You can't stay."

"I'm not leaving until I'm paid."

She wanted this settled without him making a racket and waking the kids and her neighbors. They were standing at the basement door. She took her wallet from her jacket pocket. "Look," she said. "Just take a look. I only have twenty dollars. How about if you take that and go away."

"That's not enough," he said.

"You hardly did anything."

"The job is seventy-five bucks. It's a deal. A sale." He set his bag down, with the wrench on top of it, as if he was resigning himself to a long wait.

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"What's the name of your company?"

"Goodwill Heating and Plumbing," he said.

Huh? For the first time she realized he had never once given her the same name. He was making things up as he went along. Why, she'd bet he didn't even have a shop! Coming to her house like this, in the night, uninvited . . . probably just set off in his truck at night with no idea who would be foolish enough to let him in, no business address, no records of any kind . . . She should never have let him into the house. "Send me a bill. I'll get the money and send it to you."

"Cash on completion," he said.

"You have got to leave. My husband is about to come home. If he finds you here.. . ."

"What?" he asked innocently. "Didn't you tell him about the furnace?"

She wanted to scream at him. My God, the man was unreasonable. He was making her crazy! He had no idea! Geraldo might be home any minute! Her husband would be wild, finding her dressed like some floozy, and a man hanging around. He could ruin everything worth anything in her life with his impossible demands! "Get out!"

He folded his arms and stood there with a little smile on his face. He had her. The men always did get their way. . . .

She grabbed the heavy wrench off his bag, raised it in both hands, and brought it down on his head while he stood there goggle-eyed with surprise. He had never expected such a thing from her, that was for sure. He knew nothing about her, nothing. She had to hit him several times before he stopped moving and thrashing around on the ground.

She went back up to the house to get a couple of big trash bags out of the kitchen drawer, put some yellow plastic dishwashing gloves on, and bagged him up, using tape to seal the bags. She made a quick trip to the garage for the shovel and went to work, digging a fairly deep hole, one that would cover him nicely, in the soft loamy soil at the middle of the basement. She buried him with his tools.

With a bucket of cold water she went to work on the blood that had spattered the basement wall. Cold water on blood. She wondered if men knew that.

She had a good marriage. She would do anything to save it.

She wondered if Geraldo knew that. ●

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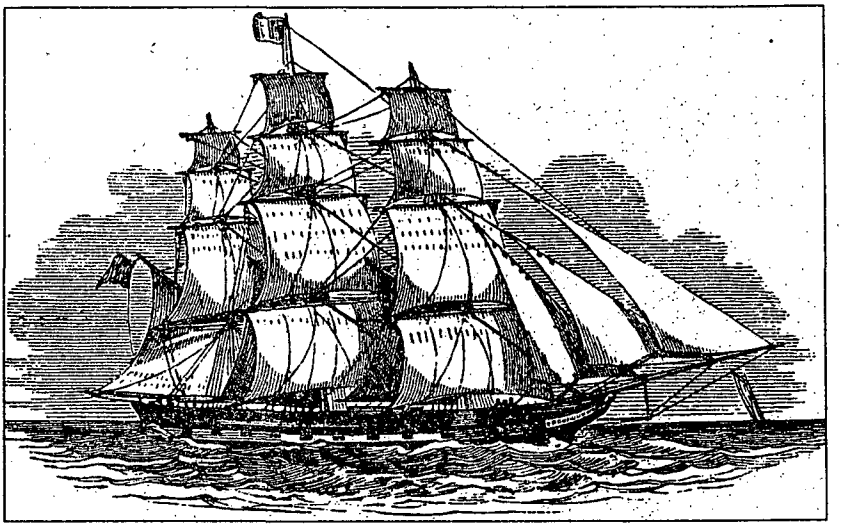

MY SHIP IS COMING IN

by Martin Edwards

The Tall Ships had returned to Liverpool and for days the city had been buzzing with excitement. Smart young men in naval uniform strutted along the streets near the river, talking in strange accents and flirting in sexy broken English with the local girls. Crowds flocked to the waterfront to see the proud square-riggers which had crossed the Atlantic before mooring in the docks on the banks of the Mersey. The ships had retraced their route of olden days, when Liverpool had been the second city of the British Empire and its exports had found a ready market in the Americas. So much had changed since then, but everyone seemed to be relishing a brief glimpse into a glorious past and even that old skinflint, the sun, had shone down all week on the celebrations.

Harry Devlin's morning in court had ended earlier than expected, and so he found himself wandering over to the pierhead to look at the ships. Tomorrow would see the final sail-past and he

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and his partner Jim Crusoe had been invited to join a party of lawyers and businessmen, accepting the hospitality of a financial services outfit newly arrived in the city. He loathed the superficial small talk that characterized such events, and had intended to discover an alternative engagement and watch the ships instead from the vantage point of his flat in the Empire Dock development, with only a six-pack of bitter for company. But taking in the scene and the sunshine, he changed his mind. The weather was too good for delight in it not to be shared.

In addition to penning a series of novels featuring solicitor Harry Devlin, Martin Edwards is an editor of mystery fiction. Several years ago he originated a series of anthologies entitled *Northern Blood* to display the work of writers from the north of England, and last year he put out the first in a new series of anthologies representing the U.K. Crime Writers Association.

When he arrived back at his office at Fenwick Court, the face of Suzanne, Crusoe and Devlin's receptionist, was aglow.

"I'm afraid I've got some bad news for you," she said.

Suzanne specialized in *schadenfreude.* Her cheekiness was exceeded only by her indolence, and if he and his partner had been less soft-hearted, they would have sacked her after a month's employment. But Harry was well aware of the length of the city's dole queue, and against his better judgment he had more than once persuaded Jim Crusoe not to add Suzanne to it. Anyone who lost a job in Liverpool these days did not easily find another.

"What's the problem?"

"Well," she said, a smile creeping across her face. "It's about me."

Bad news about Suzanne? His mind boggled: Was she proposing to work longer hours? He returned her smile noncommittally and waited.

She took a deep breath. "I've decided to leave you."

The words had the same effect upon him as might the announcement that his 100 to 1 flutter in the Grand National had romped home five lengths ahead of the favourite. She sensed at once that he was struggling to contain his emotions, but misinterpreted their nature.

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"I'm sorry, Mr. Devlin, it's no good pleading with me to stay. My mind's made up."

He racked his brains for a suitable response, reluctantly ruling out a yell of jubilation. "Well, Suzanne . . . this does come as a surprise."

She nodded. "I've kept it to myself, but I have been thinking about it for some time. No disrespect, Mr. Devlin, but the wages here are pretty lousy and, let's face it, the working conditions are hardly plush." She waved a hand towards the out-of-date magazines cluttering up the battered occasional table and the dusty yucca in the corner of the reception area. "Besides, I want to get on. I'm ambitious, I want to make something of myself."

A couple of practical suggestions sprang to Harry's mind, but he kept them to himself. "So where are you moving to? Windaybanks? Maher and Malcolm?"

"God, I wouldn't dream of going there. It would be a case of out of the frying pan and into the fire. At least you and Mr. Crusoe aren't stuck-up. No, I've had enough of the legal profession. It's not exactly glamorous, is it? So I've decided to make a career in corporate hospitality."

Harry gaped at her. Daphne du Maurier's Mrs. Danvers would, he thought, have made a more congenial hostess.

Again she misread his expression. "Yes, it's true: Even in this city there are one or two wonderful opportunities. For the right person, that is."

She smiled for a moment and Harry suddenly realized that, in the right mood—which seldom seemed to have struck her during their years together—she could be likeable enough. When her features were not screwed up in a spoiled-brat frown, when the near-constant note of complaint left her voice, she was simply another Scouse girl who kept dreaming of a better life. A little plump, perhaps—too many chocolate bars munched while the phone kept ringing—but attractive for all that. How typical that it was not until now that it had occurred to him. All the same, he had no intention of trying to talk her out of her decision to quit. Besides, the change of job might indeed be the making of her.

"A company has made me an offer I can't refuse," she confided. "There is a catch, though."

Harry had *known* it was too good to be true. "What is it?"

"They are organizing a marquee for people coming to see the

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Tall Ships tomorrow. Everyone who is anyone will be there. So they really would like me to start straightaway."

"I don't think that will be a problem," Harry said.

"But what about my month's notice?"

"Jim and I wouldn't wish to stand in your way when you have such a marvelous chance."

"Fantastic! I knew you would understand! I've always said, Mr. Devlin may seem to stagger from one crisis to another, but beneath it all he has a heart of gold!"

Harry didn't know what to say to that, but Suzanne saved him the trouble by rushing on. "There is just one more thing. If you don't mind me mentioning it."

"Go on."

"I'm supposed to be meeting my new boss at twelve so that I can give him my answer. Would it be all right if I took an early lunch?"

"Take as long as you like," said Harry, with all the magnanimity at his command.

He felt the first faint twitches of regret at his generosity when, at half past two, his secretary complained that Suzanne had still not come back and that, in deputizing on the switchboard, she was getting behind with his typing.

"It's the not knowing I don't like," said Lucy. "You'd think she would at least have had the decency to call."

"She's excited," said Harry. "I expect she's lost all track of time as her new employers wine and dine her."

Lucy grunted. She was no admirer of Suzanne. "That girl has never had the slightest consideration—"

"Look," he said gently, "a few hours' inconvenience isn't too high a price for us to pay, is it?"

She gave him a slow smile. Although they had worked closely together for years, he had made it a rule not to express even a hint of the depth of his dissatisfaction with Suzanne. But perhaps no one would have needed a degree in psychology to guess it.

"I suppose you're right," she said, and he went back to his work.

Half an hour later, she buzzed him again. "Harry, I'm getting worried about Suzanne."

You think she may have turned the job down? he was tempted to ask. But all he said was: "Don't be. It's beginning to look as though she's decided to take the rest of the day off."

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"I can't believe even she would do that. Anyway, the drawers of her desk are cluttered with her rubbish. There's no way she'd leave without stuffing it all into half a dozen carrier bags."

"So perhaps she'll turn up for it on Monday."

"I don't know. Keith, her boyfriend—you know, the hefty lad with the motorbike—has rung in. She promised to call him at two o'clock on the dot to let him know how her meeting with her new lord and master had gone. But he's heard nothing at all."

"Perhaps she forgot."

"He reckons she would never let him down."

Harry shrugged. In both his personal and professional experience, most people deluded themselves about the constancy of their loved ones. "I didn't press her to come back promptly, you know. Quite the opposite. She was obviously thrilled with this new job. After all, I've never offered her a single lavish lunch outside of Christmas. You can understand her making the most of this one."

"Keith is bothered. He says she's never broken a promise to ring him before. And she does it all the time, I can tell you. God knows what the firm's phone bill looks like. Besides, she also promised to call her mum. According to Keith, she hasn't done that either. He's so het up he's even going to ring round the local hospitals."

"Suzanne's a big girl, Lucy. She can look after herself."

"You really think so? She's only twenty-two. And there are some funny people out there."

I know, thought Harry, *most of them are our clients.* "Come on," he said calmly, "what do you think has happened to her?"

"I've no idea, but I'm sure we ought to try and find out."

He groaned. "Okay, but I'm telling you, it's a complete waste of time."

Elaine, his partner's secretary, had taken over on the switchboard. He was startled to see her dabbing a tear from her eye.

"For heaven's sake, Elaine. Let's get all this in proportion. Suzanne is probably still charming the pants off the feller who has offered her this new job. Hasn't anyone thought about ringing his company?"

"That's just the problem," said Elaine. "We can't trace them. If you ask me, they—don't exist."

Suzanne had been talking for some time, he soon learned, about making a break with legal work. The boss, he reflected, is always the last to know about these things—much the same as a cuck-

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olded spouse. The publicity surrounding the return of the Tall Ships and all the entertainments associated with it had persuaded her that corporate hospitality offered career prospects as exciting as they were remunerative. She had prepared a c.v.—an exercise in creative writing, Harry suspected—and sent it out to the specialist firms listed in the Yellow Pages. The previous afternoon, a call had come through for her at a time when Elaine was in the reception area making a vain attempt to water some life into the yucca. Suzanne had not disguised her glee at the phone message, and whilst she held the receiver in one hand, she used the other to beckon her colleague over to share the good news.

"They've picked me from over fifty applicants!" she had whispered, covering the mouthpiece. "And the pay is twice the measly sum I get here! Listen, I'll put him on the speaker."

Elaine had heard the managing director's voice loud and clear. His tone was self-confident, bordering on the brash.

"You sound like our sort of executive, Suzanne my dear. Attractive and outgoing. Interpersonal skills are so important, of course, in our line of business. We deal with leading decision-makers, you know, so we have to maintain high standards. Think you can cope?"

"Oh yes, Mr. Sachs. I'm sure of it."

Her simple assurance had seemed to be all he needed to hear. "Call me Charles, please. Very well, Suzanne, I think I can say even at this stage that the job is yours if you want it. And so the only question is, when can you start?"

"Well, when do you want me?"

A chuckle from Charles Sachs. "As soon as ever possible, Suzanne. As I mentioned, this Saturday will be a very busy day for us. If you could join us in our marquee, I would be most grateful. After that, there will be a string of other events for you to organize. As you know, the Old Trafford test match is not too far away."

"Oh yes," agreed Suzanne, who barely knew what a test match was, let alone where she might find the ground at Old Trafford.

"Would you be able to start with us at once, then?"

"Oh . . . well, yes, yes, I'm sure I can."

"Splendid! So there is no difficulty with your present employer?"

"None at all," Suzanne assured him. "After all, I've worked my fingers to the bone for them these last few years. They owe it to me not to stand in my way."

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"Excellent. In that case, the sooner we can get together the better. Naturally I'm looking forward very much to our first meeting. Perhaps you would like to join me for lunch, say? How does tomorrow sound?"

"That would be lovely."

"Then it's a date. I'll pick you up outside the Liver Building on the stroke of twelve."

"And how will I recognize you . . . er . . . Charles?"

An easy laugh. "Quite simple. I shall be driving a red Jaguar."

As she broke the connection, Suzanne shot Elaine a glance of triumph.

"You've certainly landed on your feet," the older woman said.

"Doesn't he sound dreamy?"

"Don't let Keith hear you say that."

"Oh, don't be a spoilsport. What the eye doesn't see . . ."

And Suzanne had giggled with pure delight.

"What makes you think the company was phony?" demanded Harry.

"I've spoken to all but one of the corporate hospitality places in the book," said Elaine. "None of them has heard of Suzanne. Nor of a Mr. Charles Sachs—with or without a red Jaguar."

"You don't know the name of Sachs's business?"

"No, but Keith is certain that Suzanne only sent out half a dozen job applications. There aren't too many Liverpool firms who specialize in corporate hospitality."

"And the company you haven't called?"

"The number was unobtainable."

"That must be the one. Try again."

Elaine did so and Harry listened in. It sounded as if the line had been disconnected.

Harry checked the Yellow Pages. "'The Glad Hand Partnership.' If Charles Sachs is connected with them, they can scarcely have disappeared in the space of twenty-four hours."

"What do you think we should do?"

"First things first. We don't even know if she actually met Sachs. I'll nip over the road to see if Bill Dawkes can tell me anything." He grimaced and added reluctantly, "In the meantime, check the hospitals again."

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Bill Dawkes sold fresh fruit from a barrow which he stationed each day outside the Liver Building. But even on good days—and there had been a few of them lately, thanks to the crowds swarming to see the Tall Ships—when he managed to get rid of his stock by midafternoon, he would always hang around until the rush hour had passed. He was a widower who had been working in the city centre for close on forty years, and Harry guessed that even if he never flogged another banana, it would take an earthquake to prevent him from turning up and chatting to all and sundry between nine and half-five. If anyone was likely to have seen Suzanne at the time of her intended meeting with Charles Sachs, it was Bill.

And the old man did not disappoint. " 'Course I saw her," he confirmed. "Not that she had time to say hello. Soon as I spotted her, I reckoned she was meeting a feller."

"How on earth did you make that out, Bill?" asked Harry, in his best Dr. Watson voice.

"Never seen her hair done so nice in all the years I've known her," said the old man simply. "And was I right? 'Course I was. She looked up and down the Strand for a couple of minutes, and then blow me down if a Jag doesn't pull up right next to her."

"A Jaguar?" So she had met Sachs after all.

"Red 'un. The window wound down and she said something to the feller inside, then opened the door and hopped in. They headed off towards the docks."

"You didn't by any chance catch sight of the car driver?"

Bill didn't let him down. "No more than a glimpse when he leaned across to speak to her. Youngish feller by my reckoning. Fair hair, salesman's smile."

"You're very observant."

The old man shrugged. "Got nothing better to do all day, have I, but keep my eyes open." He paused. "What's the problem?"

"She's leaving us. The man you saw was her new boss. He was supposed to be giving her lunch, but she's not come back or let anyone know where she is."

"Think she's got herself in a spot of bother?"

"I wish I knew," said Harry, although in his heart of hearts he thought he did.

His next stop was the address for Glad Hand, which he had memorized from the Yellow Pages. It was close to the Dock Road, a

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small business park with one-story units and a forest of To Let signs. Leaving his car in one of the empty marked spaces at the entrance to the park, he walked along the pavement, checking off the names over the doors. The fifth bore a signboard which proclaimed The Glad Hand Partnership—Specialists in Corporate Entertainment. Harry tried the handle. It was locked.

A tubby middle-aged woman poked her head round the door of the adjoining unit, a place rejoicing in the name of Anguish Alarms. "Looking for someone, love?"

"Glad Hand?"

"Thumbs Down, more like. Sorry to disappoint you, love, but they've gone bust. Owe you money, do they?"

"No, but I'm surprised by what you say. They offered a friend of mine a job only yesterday."

The woman shook her head. "Must be some mistake. The Azha brothers—the people who ran Glad Hand—did a flit weeks ago. They'll be back in Bangladesh by now, if I know anything." A dreamy look came into her eyes. "Rascals, of course, but gorgeous blokes, all the same. They told me they were princes in their home country. But if they're royalty, I'm the Queen Mother."

"And Charles Sachs? Did he work for them?"

She gave him a baffled stare. "Never heard of him. No, the brothers had a couple of young girls working for them, but no one else that I ever knew."

So: a dead end. Harry groaned as he racked his brain, trying to salvage something from his visit. "Could it be that someone has been using the premises since the Azhas fled?"

"No chance," she said with unmistakable pride. "They invested in one of our latest alarms. State-of-the-art technology, I can assure you. No one could get in next door without half the neighbourhood hearing of it. My husband hasn't disconnected the system yet, even though they never paid us everything they owed, I might add. He's soft-hearted is my—"

"So there's no way anyone could be operating the Glad Hand business, or any other, from these offices?" Harry interrupted.

"No way in the world," she assured him.

"Oh well. Thanks anyway. I must be going . . . wait a minute!"

In turning to leave, he had glanced over to the opposite side of the road. A lorry was parked in front of a couple of the units, obscuring parts of the signboards. The first said Charles and the second Sacks. As Harry's mind whirled, a man in overalls jumped

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into the cab and the lorry moved off, revealing the full signboards. Charles Kahn—Brushmaker and Kirkdale Sacks, respectively.

"Are you all right, love?"

"I'm fine," he said slowly. "Listen, I'm sure the chap I'm looking for—he did call himself Charles Sachs, but that's not his real name—is familiar with this place. He may even be based here. Tell me, do you know anyone who drives a red Jaguar?"

The woman frowned. "There's Mr. Lovell, of course."

"And who is he?"

She gestured to a separate block further down the road. "He's one of the directors of Beagries, the developers who own this whole park. Those are their offices."

"So I can find him over there?"

"Not today you can't. He and his wife have been invited to one of these Tall Ships jamborees by the Lord Mayor."

As one door opened, another shut. "And his Jaguar? Any idea where that may be?"

"You'd have to ask Carl. That's Mr. Lovell's chauffeur. He was banned from driving, you know, Mr. Lovell. They caught him in the Mersey Tunnel one night after he'd been at some posh dinner. So he had to hire Carl Shadford."

Harry scratched his head. "This may seem a strange question, but is it possible that Carl Shadford might have had access to mail sent to the Azha brothers?"

"Since you mention it," said the woman, amiably blunt, "it seems more than strange, and it makes no sense to me whatsoever. . . . But you're not the first person to come here who's been ripped off by the Azhas. I know how you feel, believe me. You can't imagine how much one of our latest alarms . . ."

"I'm sorry to press you," said Harry, "but this is rather urgent. About the mail . . ."

"Oh yes, I'm a great one for sidetracking, my husband's always telling me so. Well, their mail is being held by Beagries. The letterbox is sealed up, as you can see, and the postman delivers it to the admin block. So I suppose it's possible Carl could have—"

"What can you tell me about Carl?"

The woman's face darkened. "I'll be straight with you. I don't care for the man. Thinks a lot of himself, if you ask me. Talks posh, but Thelma, the girl I know at Beagries, was telling me she's heard rumours that he's been inside. Don't ask me what for."

"Can you describe him? Believe me, it is important."

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Her powers of observation might not have been quite in Bill Dawkes's class, but they were good enough. Shadford was in his early thirties, fair-haired, tall, and broad-shouldered. He was a natty dresser and she reckoned he had ideas above his station. She'd once seen him carrying a slim attaché case bearing his own initials in gold lettering.

"C. S.," said Harry to himself. "Carl Shadford—or Charles Sachs. A very convenient alias."

"Pardon?"

"Nothing. I wonder, have you seen him this morning?"

"I think he said hello just before nine. When Mr. Lovell's away, he has a few odd jobs to do around the offices, but I don't think they stretch him. He seems to loaf around a lot, killing time."

Killing time. For once the commonplace phrase made Harry shiver. Where had Carl Shadford taken Suzanne?

"Does he live locally?"

"I've no idea," said the woman. "You'd have to ask Thelma."

"I'd like to do that. Can you introduce me?"

She folded her arms. "Don't you think you ought to tell me what this is all about, Mr. . . . ?"

"Devlin. Fair enough. But can we walk as we talk? Somehow I feel I haven't much time to lose."

In half a dozen sentences he explained how Suzanne's disappearance had brought him here. The woman—she told him her name was Margaret—paled as she absorbed the implications of his story. But Harry sensed she was one of those people who was good in a crisis. Her mouth compressed into a thin line and she wasted no more words as she led him to reception in the business park admin block.

"Thelma, this is Mr. Devlin. He needs to find Carl Shadford."

"He's welcome to him." The girl's grimace robbed the Welcome sign on her desk of its sincerity. Harry was for a moment reminded of Suzanne, but he banished the thought at once. For the first time in his life, he wanted nothing more than to see his sulky receptionist again.

"Any idea where he might be?"

Thelma spread long bare arms. "Search me. He lives in a bedsit just off Smithdown Road. I heard him say something about having to take the car back to the Palace, but that was hours ago. If you ask me, he's probably driving up and down ogling at girls in short skirts as per bloody usual."

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"The Palace?"

"Mr. Lovell's house. He lives out near Halsall. It's a real mansion, by all accounts. Nine bedrooms, swimming pool, tennis court, you name it. Though who needs nine bedrooms in this day and age, I've never managed to work out."

A place that size might come in very handy, thought Harry, for someone impersonating a company boss and wanting to impress a gullible girl. Especially on a day when the owners of the house were out.

"Would you mind if I called my office?"

"What's this all about?" Thelma asked. But he left it to Margaret to explain while he rang to update Lucy.

"Can you tell the police and let them know what's happened, please?"

"Keith's already done that," his secretary said. "He turned up here five minutes ago in a right state. What are you planning to do now?"

"I think I may take a look at Lovell's house. On the off chance."

"Oh God, Harry, I hope she's all right."

"I'm sure she is."

"Liar," Lucy said bluntly. "You sound worried sick."

A couple of minutes away from the address Thelma had given him, Harry caught sight of something that almost made him swerve into a ditch. As he rounded a bend on the country lane that led to Lovell's house, he saw sunlight glinting on the bonnet of a red Jaguar. The car was parked on a grassy verge at a point where the road skirted a small wood. He pulled in behind it and sprinted round to the driver's door. The car was empty, but on the backseat he could see the attaché case Margaret had mentioned. A useful prop, of course, for a man playing the part of a company boss.

A footpath signpost pointed the way to Button Spinney. He clambered over a stile and followed a dirt track curving between the trees. The low branches scraped his scalp, forcing him to duck and slow his pace. Because it had not rained since the last test match (all five days washed out without a ball being bowled) the dried mud of the track was unmarked by footprints. Yet where else could Shadford have taken Suzanne?

Harry strained his ears in a vain attempt to hear something

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other than the whistling of unseen birds. His palms were as damp as his lips were dry. He could only hope that he was not too late.

Suddenly he heard a woman cry out. Suzanne, it had to be Suzanne.

He hurried forward, oblivious of the leaves brushing into his eyes, the wood scraping the skin of his cheeks. He was almost bent double, crouching like an animal about to pounce—but on what?

The path twisted again and at once he was in a clearing. Carl Shadford was on the ground with Suzanne. But the only act of violence to which Harry had become witness was the raking of her long red fingernails down the bare back of her lover as he reached a shuddering climax.

"You should have made your excuses and left," said Jim Crusoe the following afternoon. They were standing outside their hosts' marquee, watching the Grand Parade of Sail. Unable to contain his delight, Jim had put his glass of Pimm's down on the floor while he listened to Harry's account of the unfolding drama at Button Spinney.

"I've never known a confrontation like it. Albert Campion never had this trouble. It's difficult to take a culprit seriously when his trousers are down around his ankles. It was almost a relief when Keith arrived."

"All hell broke loose, I gather."

"And Shadford's jaw was broken, more to the point. I'll never forget the scene, with that big lad in leathers wrestling a half-naked Lothario and Suzanne screaming blue murder while she struggled to get her knickers back on. I don't think I've ever been so glad to see the police turn up in my life."

"How did they get there?"

"Lucy had persuaded them to take Suzanne's disappearance seriously, but by then Keith had already decided to follow me up to Lovell's place on his motorbike. The police car passed the same way and even they couldn't miss my car, a red Jag, and a Harley Davidson crammed together by the side of the road. So they decided to investigate."

"And what have they done with Shadford?"

"Once his jaw had been wired up at Sefton General, they invited him to assist with one or two inquiries."

"Is it true he has a record?"

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"Fraud and theft and even a driving-while-disqualified. Oddly enough, he was no more entitled to drive the Jag than the man from Beagries. They didn't check up on him properly when he applied for the job. Apparently, he even managed to gull a hard-bitten businessman like Lovell by touching his forelock and flashing a couple of forged references. Charming the pants off Suzanne was plain sailing by comparison."

"So no history of violence or offences against women, after all?"

"None known. Keith's the one who faces a wounding charge, although my guess is that the Crown Prosecution Service will want to soft-pedal on that one. And yet . . ."

"Yes?"

"Ah, forget it."

He sipped at his drink and looked out towards the river. Thousands of people were packed on each bank and their excited chatter almost drowned out the crackle of the commentary on the parade. He could see a cutter, a sloop, a three-masted schooner, and a barquentine, elegant vessels that had crossed half the world to be here today. And yet his mind was elsewhere as he wondered what might have happened once Suzanne had learned the truth about Carl Shadford's deception of her. He imagined her fury provoking the chauffeur and . . . well, for all the farce of the showdown at Button Spinney, Harry would never regret what he had done.

He arrived early at work on Monday morning, anxious to catch up on work ignored during Friday's drama. Suzanne was standing next to the desk in reception and she greeted him with a smile that surprised him with its warmth.

"I wasn't expecting to see you here this morning," he said.

"I do want to thank you for—for everything. Keith and I—we're very grateful."

"You've kissed and made up? That's good news."

"And I've got some more good news for you," she said, beaming. "I've decided to withdraw my resignation. It's the least I could do after you helped to save me from that—that bastard. I've realized the grass isn't always greener on the other side. Never mind what I said about the wages here. Money isn't everything. I can promise you, Mr. Devlin, this time I'm here to stay."

Harry slowly took in her unshakeably magnanimous expression and, despite himself, began to laugh. ●

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THE POET'S WIFE'S CAT

by Martin Naparsteck

The door squeaked when the cat pushed it open, and he walked to the old man lying on the floor in front of the unlit fireplace and kissed him, licking his tongue across the old man's lips. Then the cat startled and jumped back an inch or two, as if he realized the old man was dead. From somewhere, perhaps from everywhere, the cat heard a voice:

> I've walked the back roads of Paradise,
> Seen the hairy carcass of a coyote,
> The half-eaten carcass of an eagle,
> Remembered Paradise is not a place you go to,
> It's a place you've been. . . .

The cat scampered from the room and the dead man remained prone and cold, alone. The cat went to the basement and walked around the staircase to where the washer was attached by a hose to the gray metal sink and stood for a moment next to his two bowls, one for water, one for dry food. The moist food, the kind with meat, was always served on a paper plate that the old man threw away after the cat completed his dinner. But the bowls, the yellow one for water, the red one for dry food, were usually full, and even though the cat preferred his moisture and solids from the food on the paper plates, when he was hungry and the old man wasn't around, he'd go to his bowls. Now they had been empty for days, for as long as the cat first saw the old man lying on the floor.

The cat had never liked the old man. Ever since the old woman left, just disappeared one day, and the two younger women—who long, long ago had been children—kissed the old man goodbye and carried things out of the house, the cat and the old man had been there alone. The old man always yelled at the cat to get off the kitchen table, and to not sit on the furniture, and to not make noise at night. And when the old man said things into that small black box of his and then pushed buttons and the small black box

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said the exact things back to the old man, the cat had to be absolutely quiet, for the old man seemed to want to listen carefully to the black box. And the old man would say the same words again but with one or two words somehow different, and the box would again repeat the words, with the exact changes the old man had made. And after that routine had been done a dozen times or two dozen times—the cat knew nothing of counting—the old man put his fingers on a machine and yellow images appeared on a black screen, and then another machine made noise and black images appeared on white paper, and the old man put that paper into a brown envelope, and the cat never again saw the paper, but after a long time the mailman brought a package and the old man opened it and took out several books, thin but hard, and he opened one and read from it, and the cat recognized the sounds as the same ones the old man had made into the black box that spoke back to the old man.

Two more days and nights passed, and the cat three or four or five times each day and each night visited the old man, pleaded with him to stand and go to the kitchen and take food from a can and put it on a paper plate, or at least the dry food from the box and put it into the bowl, and water, oh yes, please, water. The cat visited the sinks in the kitchen and the bathroom, but no water dripped from them; somehow, when the old woman was still there, the faucets always dripped, and the cat drank whenever he wanted. But the old man kept the faucets from dripping and left the lid on the commode down.

Drip, drip, drip, drip, drip. How he had loved that sound. But now there was quiet. Quiet except for the gentle thud when the cat jumped from the table to the floor, and for the occasional, pliant murmur he emitted when he thought of his hunger, and for that infernal box that made those horrible words, four, five, six, seven times a day: "I've walked the back roads of Paradise . . ." How the cat hated that box with its voice almost exactly like the old man's.

Drip, drip, drip, drip. The cat at times thought he could hear the water from the faucets, but when he visited one of them it was always dry. But still—drip, drip, drip—the sound would not go from his mind. Drip, drip, drip.

The third day he went into the living room to avoid the old man on the floor, who now had an uncomforting odor about him, like food that had stayed too long on the paper plate. A loud pounding noise, a

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crash, the front door splintered, a gash appeared in it, a thick red piece of metal on a long stick, and a hand came through the gash and reached in and grasped the doorknob and the door swung open.

Three men, two in blue uniforms, one in bluejeans and a gray T-shirt, entered. The cat scampered with a rapidly beating heart into the room with the old man. The three men followed him. One gasped; they spoke to each other.

The cat couldn't understand their words, that they were saying the old man was dead, had been dead for days, that the wide bruise on his forehead must have come from having hit his head on the edge of the fireplace as he fell, that they wondered how he fell, wondered if he had been pushed.

The dryness in his mouth and throat engulfed the cat's consciousness, and as much as he wanted to stay with the men to understand their purpose in being there, he had to leave, had to listen to the drip, drip, drip, drip in his mind. He rushed to the kitchen, gravitated to the sink top, and looked forlornly at the faucet; he touched one of the knobs next to it with his paw, just as the old man and old woman had done to make water appear, but for him it did nothing. He murmured, as if he did not have enough strength for any other sound, but it was a weakness of spirit more than of body. He rushed to the basement to check the yellow bowl, but it was still dry. Drip, drip, drip, drip, drip. How he hated that maddening sound. Drip, drip, drip. He leaped and balanced himself on the narrow edge of the gray basement sink and saw that the two faucets there were also dry. He looked behind himself, as if he had been startled, but he hadn't been, and he snapped his head forward, so he faced the wall behind the sink, and he jumped an inch or two or three straight up, as if he had been frightened, but he hadn't been, and he ran, fast as he could—drip, drip, drip, drip, drip—up the stairs, through the living room, into the room with the old man, and without stopping his running he noticed that the old man was now shrouded in white—a sheet from one of the beds—and the cat leaped up and forward—drip, drip, drip, drip—and his front paws suddenly had long claws, and he slammed into the chest of one of the men with a blue suit who was speaking into the telephone, and the man sucked in air and smashed the side of his arm into the cat, and the other man in a blue suit grabbed the cat, and the cat, filled with fright and horror and worse, far worse, thirst, enraging thirst, screeched and squirmed and reached with his claws for any part of the man he

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could reach, but the man held him out and grimaced, turning his head, his eyes away. "In here," someone said, and the cat was suddenly flying through the air and hit something—a wall—and then there was darkness. That quieted and stilled the cat for a few moments, but then he realized he was in a closet, in darkness, standing on shoes, beneath coats, and he knew he could not remain in there, that he needed water, oh how he needed water, and he screeched, shrilled, squealed, and shrieked. Above his own noises, he heard the men speak, but couldn't understand what they said. He must have rabies, must be crazy, now we know what happened to the old man, the poet, maybe he went crazy hearing that poem over and over, the way the old man had that tape recorder hooked up to that timer would drive me crazy too, see the way that cat slammed into my chest, near knocked me over, and I ain't in my seventies neither.

Drip, drip, drip, drip, drip.

Rabies, one of them repeated.

Drip, drip, drip, drip, drip.

The cat still screeched and shrilled. The thirst, the dryness, the longing, the hurting in his throat and mouth: He had no other choice.

Drip, drip, drip, drip, drip.

Then another voice: He was always such a calm cat, our little Jeremiah, I can't believe he did such a thing, may I see him? A man said, Better wait till the animal control people get here, but it's clear what happened, he's crazed, and even if it ain't rabies, he's crazed, killed your ex-husband, and I'm afraid he's going to have to be destroyed.

Drip, drip, drip, drip.

The closet door opened and a man in a white suit with thick gloves suddenly grasped the cat harshly, one glove on each side, fingers locking legs in place, and rushed the cat faster than the cat knew what has happening into a cage of thick wire mesh. The cage was lifted and carried to the living room, but the old woman came after the cage quickly and asked the man in white, Oh, can I spend just a few moments alone with my little darling, he was such a nice friend for so long, and I may never see him again if you really are going to destroy him. The man in white put the cage down and said, Guess I have to get some information for these forms, and the old woman, alone in the living room with the cat, knelt beside the wire-mesh cage and said, Oh, thank you so much, Jeremiah, you've

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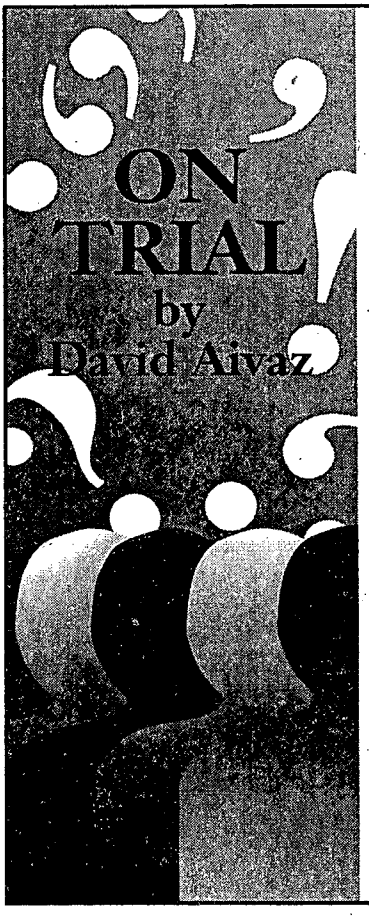
saved me from a murder charge, because of you they'll never even suspect. Oh, you must not have eaten or had anything to drink for so long. The man in the white suit came back in. Can you feed him and give him milk or water, please. The man in the white suit shrugged. Yeah, sure, ma'am, we'll see he gets plenty to eat and drink just before we put him to sleep.

Just then the tape recorder came on again: "I've walked the back roads of Paradise . . ." ●



Preposition
On the take,
Conjunction pleading
A bad break.
Pronoun pleading
Self-defense,
Assaultive verb
Moody, tense.
The semi-colon
(In absentia),
The exclamation point
(Dementia).
A noun uncertain
Of its case,
An adjective
That picks its pocket:
Another entry
For the docket.
And by the bent
Blue-pencil narc
A frame, quoth
The quotation mark.

All stand. They sway in place
Sputtering, unnerved
By the sentence
They've deserved.

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The Power of Suggestion

by Helen Tucker

It was getting weird. Downright scary, in fact.

At first he had thought it was a trick, some kind of practical joke she was playing on him. But he soon realized that was a stupid idea, because in the fifteen years they had been married, he'd never known her to play a joke on him or anyone else, practical or otherwise. Nelda was not the joking type. For that matter, more often than not, she didn't even get the point of a joke *he* told. She would give that little artificial laugh, but he could tell by the vacant look in her pale blue eyes that she simply didn't *get* it.

The author of four hardcover and twelve paperback original novels, Helen Tucker is a former newspaper reporter who gave up the trade several years ago in order to write full-time. She was the first woman to receive a Distinguished Alumni Award from Wake Forest University for her service in the literary arts, and she was named artist of the year by the Franklin County (North Carolina) Arts Council in 1992.

After deciding it wasn't a joke, he was positive that it must be some kind of fad or craze going around that he hadn't heard about. After all, he worked all day and didn't have time to waste on finding out what sort of nonsense currently occupied the minds of women. He was forty-two years old, one of the leading designers in Beldon and Nelms Architectural Company, and before the year was out, he expected to be made a partner in the firm. Sometimes he even worked at night (and sometimes he didn't, but Nelda thought he did). You didn't get to be a partner by staying home day and night to see what your wife was up to or what kind of crap she was reading. Before all this weird stuff began, he'd never known Nelda to read anything but fashion magazines and books about the beautiful people, whoever the hell they were.

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He figured Nelda was pretty typical of the average forty-year-old housewife. She had a rinse put on her blond hair, which she wore in a Dutchboy cut, every so often to keep it that color, her skin was still pretty good (probably thanks to whatever that stuff was she slapped on at regular intervals), and she didn't need a lot of makeup. She was tall, five-eight, and her figure was still good, though she had thickened a bit in the middle. She dressed sensibly, but always in style, and spent just about all the money he gave her on clothes. She could pass for . . . oh, maybe thirty-five, if you stretched your imagination a bit. She was interested in buying nice things for the house, trying out new recipes, her weekly bridge game with "the girls," and lunching twice a week with some of her old college friends who lived in the city. To his knowledge, she had never been interested in occult mumbo jumbo or reading books about same.

The weird stuff started about six weeks ago and showed no signs of stopping or even letting up. It was, in fact, getting worse. Actually, it might have been going on for a while before he noticed. He first became aware of the spooky undertones one night after dinner when he sat down on the sofa, on the end by the three-way lamp, to catch up on the latest *Architectural Digest.* On the table, under the lamp, was a pile of books. The title of the top book was *Psychic Experiences Through the Ages.* What the hell was Nelda doing with a book like that? He took the second book off the pile. *Early Spiritualism.* The third book, *Psychical Research.* And the fourth, *Telepathy in Everyday Life.* Beneath that book was a bunch of brochures and pamphlets on clairvoyance, extrasensory perception, precognition, and altered states of consciousness.

"Jehovah's Jaguar, Nelda! Where'd you get this stuff?"

She looked up briefly from her Queen Anne chair by the fireplace. "The library." Then she was buried again in the book she held, the title of which was *Hypnosis and Dream Telepathy.*

"Why're you reading this junk?"

She looked up again, the epitome of patience. "I don't think it's junk, Hugh. They were all written by experts in their field."

"Whatever. Why're you reading it?"

She lowered the book again. "A couple of the girls think I may have ESP or something like it, and I thought if I read up on the subject, I could find out for sure."

"So now you're going to start telling fortunes?"

"Hardly." She gave him a condescending smile. "Some rather . . .

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odd things have been happening lately, and I confess I've been a bit shaken by them."

"Like what?"

"Well, at a recent bridge game, it occurred to me suddenly that I knew every card that was going to be played before it was played. When I realized that, I also sensed that I knew what cards were in the other three hands even before the bidding began. Of course, with an advantage like that, I mopped up that afternoon."

He laughed, first uproariously, then derisively. "I'll take you with me to my next poker game."

"It isn't funny, Hugh. It's a little . . . frightening." She paused, then said, "The next thing that happened was a lunch a couple of days later. Ruth and Barb and I were to meet at The Tea Kettle. Ruth arrived at the same time, and I said to her—I don't know where I got the idea—'Barb isn't coming. She's going to phone and tell the hostess to tell us she's ill.' Sure enough, we had no sooner sat down than the hostess came over and said, 'Mrs. Long just called and said to tell you she's not feeling well and can't make it today.' "

He couldn't think of a word to say. He just looked at her, wondering if his very practical, down-to-earth wife had all of a sudden run mad.

He had planned to go to Sonja's that night. After all, he hadn't seen her for three days. But something about the seriousness of Nelda's expression, her tone of voice, made him decide to stay home. It was easy enough to get away when he wanted to. All he had to say was, "We're having some problems with the Grandy building," or, "That new house on May Avenue, well, the owner has changed his mind about the shape of the deck, so I've got to have it done by tomorrow." And he'd be off for a few hours of bliss with Sonja. Nelda was gullible as hell. She never suspected anything. But tonight—he didn't know why—he thought he'd better not go.

"Anything else?" he asked. "Or is that the sum total of your psychic experiences?"

"Are you making fun of me?" A small frown furrowed her forehead.

"No, of course not. I'm just curious."

"There've been some little things that made me wonder, but nothing as significant as the two I told you about. The thing is, these experiences, as you call them, are happening more often, and each time I get a stronger premonition." She stopped sud-

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denly and looked toward the telephone on the end table. "Like right now. The phone is going to ring."

He waited. A minute, two minutes, three minutes. Nothing happened. And then the phone rang.

"Don't bother to answer it," she said. "It's a wrong number."

An act of Congress could not have prevented him from picking up the phone. "Hello."

"Has Jimmy come in yet?" asked a gruff voice.

He held the phone away from him, looking at it as though it were a hissing viper, then he barked into it, "Wrong number!"

She continued with her reading without looking up and without saying "I told you so," for which he would have been grateful had he not been so befuddled. What the hell was going on here? Had the woman suddenly become possessed with some kind of strange powers? Ditch-water dull Nelda, whom he could read like a child's primer? It couldn't be.

"Has something happened to you, something strange?" he asked. "I mean—do you feel, er, different? Headache or . . . anything?"

"Not at all. I feel the same as I always have."

He couldn't think of anything else to ask, so he just sat staring at her, going over in his mind the horrendous difference it could make in his life if his wife really had suddenly become a seer into the future. But, of course, he didn't believe in that stuff and his first thought had been correct. It was just a fad, a phase she was going through, reading all those crazy books. She'd get tired of it soon enough and go back to being ditch-water dull Nelda whose every move and sentence he could anticipate. And that made him psychic in his own right, didn't it?

But that didn't explain the telephone business. How had she known?

It had taken him hours to get to sleep that night, but by the next morning he was ready to pooh-pooh the whole psychic business. If you played bridge with the same people week after week, year after year, you could tell by looking at their expressions what kind of cards they were holding, just as he could tell by the expressions, or lack thereof, on the faces of the members of his poker club. And it was a safe enough guess that Barbara Long wouldn't show up for a lunch date: That hypochondriac canceled half her social engagements because of some imaginary illness. As for the phone, what the hell? They never got any calls at night anyway, so if the phone rang, there was a ninety-five percent chance it was a wrong number.

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Nelda was getting ideas from all that crap she was reading. She'd lose interest pretty soon and go back to fashion magazines and the beautiful people, whoever the hell they were.

He scrutinized himself in the mirror extra carefully while shaving. Had it been that long since he'd checked, or had his hairline receded a bit more overnight? And was that puffiness under his eyes the beginning of bags? He worked out at the gym once a week in an effort to keep a flat stomach, but there was nothing the gym could do about eyes and hair. He couldn't afford to let himself go in any way, not if he wanted to keep Sonja. She was a beaut: statuesque brunette, heart-shaped face with sexy, pouty lips, skin that almost glowed in the dark, and she was fifteen years younger than he. He'd already invested a fortune in her: all that jewelry, lingerie, champagne, and room-service dinners (he couldn't afford to take her out and be seen by someone who knew him; it would jeopardize his partnership). So he paid her rent in the hotel suite on the twelfth floor, and he hoped that he was the only one who visited her there. Had to be, he kept telling himself, because she was always available for him, even on the spur of the moment.

Tonight he would see her for sure. Nelda could predict ringing phones, sick friends, card games, or the end of civilization as we know it; his own prediction was that he'd have one hell of a night with Sonja.

It was about a week, possibly ten days, later that he had to go home unexpectedly in the middle of the morning. He'd left plumbing estimates for the Grandy building in a folder on the bureau, just walked right out that morning without seeing it. The house was quiet when he entered—no TV or radio talk shows or CDs playing golden oldies—and his first thought was that Nelda wasn't home, but then he remembered seeing her car in the driveway.

He found her sitting at her little antique desk in a corner of the living room. She was studying something, her concentration so great that she did not even hear him as he approached. As he bent over her, he saw what she was studying so intently. A sheet of white paper, completely blank.

"What . . ." he began, but at the sound of his voice, she started violently, let out a little scream, and turned in her chair.

"Good Lord, Hugh, what are you doing home now? You just about scared me into apoplexy."

"Sorry," he said, "I forgot that folder on the bureau. Had to come

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back for it. What are you doing?" he added, although it was perfectly obvious she wasn't doing a damn thing.

"I—I was just thinking." She had a guilty look about her, as though she had been caught doing something underhanded.

"About what?"

She hesitated a second or two, then, looking down at the Oriental rug as though counting figures in the design, said, "It's gotten worse, Hugh. Much more prevalent."

He really didn't have time to stand there and jaw with her about the trivialities of her life. "What are you talking about, Nelda?"

"The ESP . . . clairvoyance, or whatever you want to call it."

He didn't want to call it anything; he'd prefer to ignore it, forget it altogether. She was still reading those stupid books all the time, and he'd certainly done a good job of ignoring that. "What now?" he asked with as much civility as he could manage. "You see something written on that blank paper?"

She nodded, then shook her head. "Not really, but when I first saw this piece of paper, it came to me that I'm going to get a letter today from someone I haven't heard from in years. Someone I'd completely forgotten about. When you came in, I was trying to figure out who it could be."

He laughed at her. "Why waste time? Just wait till the postman comes and you will know." He laughed again. "It's just your imagination working overtime because of those lunatic books you read. You're turning into a real loony tune, you know that?"

He didn't wait for an answer. He went up to the bedroom, got his folder, and went back down to the living-room door. "I may be a little late coming in tonight," he told her. "There's a dinner meeting, followed by some business. May be eleven or after before it breaks up."

She didn't look around, just nodded.

As he was getting in his car, he saw the postman's red, white, and blue jeep turn the corner. Ha! He would wait for the mail, take it to her, and convince her that this ESP she thought she had was nothing but pure, unadulterated rubbish.

He took the handful of mail from the postman, and without even looking through it, rushed back into the house and dropped it on the desk in front of her. "There," he said, "show me the letter from your long-lost friend, or whoever."

She went through the mail slowly: bills, advertisements, an envelope of coupons, and a letter addressed to her in a strange,

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circular handwriting. She looked up at him, a somewhat frightened expression on her face, then opened the letter. He leaned over her shoulder and read as she did:

Dear Nelda,

It's been years, and you probably don't even remember me, but we were acquainted in college (I hesitate to say friends, because we didn't see that much of each other). My husband and I have just moved here from Kansas City, and I would like very much to see you again and get reacquainted. We don't know any people here yet except those Jack works with. I would appreciate it so much if you would call me sometime.

Sincerely,
Nita Conway Delahan

There was a P.S. which gave the phone number.

He couldn't get it out of his mind. Had his average, dull, ordinary wife really become possessed of some kind of psychic powers? Impossible! He didn't believe it for a minute. And yet . . . What else could explain the strange goings-on?

That night when he went to his dinner meeting (with Sonja), he was still trying to find some logical explanation.

"What's the matter with you?" Sonja complained after she had rolled the room-service dinner trolley out into the hall. "You haven't spoken a dozen words since you came in. I ordered your favorite meal, your favorite wine, and I'm wearing the negligee you brought me last week. You haven't commented on anything or even noticed anything."

He knew if there was anything Sonja couldn't stand, it was being ignored. He'd had some disappointing evenings—she had sent him home after about thirty minutes—when she'd been convinced she did not have his absolute and unconditional attention.

"My dear, beautiful girl," he said quickly, pulling her down beside him on the small flowered-chintz sofa, "forgive me if I sometimes take all this perfection for granted. You see, I've come to expect nothing less from you. The way you look, the things you do . . . you are the ideal in every way."

The words were so far removed from his usual pattern of conversation or compliments that he felt he was speaking a foreign tongue. It was almost funny, a joke, but it seemed to satisfy, even please her, for she smiled and snuggled closer to him. "Problems

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at work?" she asked. That, too, was unusual, because they always talked about her, not him.

"No, nothing like that," he said, and then he decided to tell her. "Nelda has been acting . . . I don't know . . . sort of strange lately. Well, not strange, maybe, but bizarre things have been happening."

"She's found out about us?"

"Oh, no. No way that could happen. I'm too careful." And then he told her about the phone call and the letter and about all the books Nelda had been reading.

Anything Sonja didn't understand was dismissed with a little shrug and a change of subject. As was this. "All those crazy books," she said. "That would send anybody around the bend. How do you like my new perfume? Do I smell like Elizabeth Taylor?"

"I don't know how Elizabeth Taylor smells," he said, laughing, and from then on, they had an exemplary evening.

It was almost eleven-thirty when he went home. He expected to find Nelda fast asleep in her twin bed, possibly with the bedside lamp still on and one of those nutty books lying open beside her. What he found was Nelda sitting up in bed, her fingers pressed against her temples, her eyes closed.

"What's the matter?" he asked. "You got a headache or something?"

She opened her eyes slowly and looked around as though coming out of a trance or regaining consciousness after a coma. He almost expected her to say, "Where am I?"

For a long time she didn't say anything, and then: "Hugh, I have been seeing the oddest thing: a series of pictures in my mind, all in still-life."

"Nelda, what the hell are you talking about?"

He sat down on his bed and removed his shoes. Kee-rist, he hoped she wasn't going to start her loony-tune business now. He was wiped out. Sonja had had the agility of an Olympic gymnast tonight. He smiled, remembering.

"I was trying to read," she said, "but these pictures kept flashing across my mind. Then, I'm not sure what happened, but I seemed to go outside myself. Maybe it was an altered state of consciousness. The pictures became much clearer. Much."

He'd be damned if he'd ask her what kind of pictures. He didn't even want to know.

She told him anyway. "I saw a room. It was like a hotel room, a suite, maybe, but it was furnished better than the average hotel

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room. There were some pictures, family pictures I suppose, on a table, and there was a little sofa or love seat with flowered upholstery, and you were sitting there. You were by yourself, but your mouth was moving as though you were talking to someone. That picture faded and another came on—exactly as though it were being shown on a screen—and you were not alone anymore. There was a woman sitting beside you on the sofa, a very pretty dark-haired woman. Hugh, am I going crazy, or is it . . . is it the ESP again?"

He was staring at her, his mind in turmoil. "What—what are you talking about?" His voice came out scarcely above a whisper.

"I'm not sure. I saw it so clearly, but I'm not sure what it was I was seeing. Where was your meeting tonight?"

"At the Baxter Hotel. We met in the suite of a visiting architect." He thought it best to get at least a remnant of truth in his answer.

"That explains it then." She let out a sigh of relief. "I was seeing the meeting. But I wonder why I didn't see more than just two people."

He didn't answer; he couldn't.

She plumped her pillow several times and lay down. When he came out of the bathroom, she was either asleep or pretending to be.

But it was nearly dawn before he closed his eyes.

The first thing he did when he got to his office that morning was to call Sonja and tell her she would have to move from the Baxter to the Cromley on the other side of town.

"In your dreams, buster," she said, furious at having been awakened and even more furious at being told she would have to leave her deluxe digs. "I'm not going to some second-rate fleabag."

"The Cromley is a first-class apartment hotel, and I'll see that you have as much space there as you have at the Baxter. I'll make the arrangements this morning and you can move this afternoon." He hung up before she could protest further.

He didn't have a clue what had happened to Nelda or what was going on in *her* mind, but obviously she didn't know (or hadn't seen pictures) of his intimate moments with Sonja. It seemed to be a good idea to move Sonja farther away from Nelda (maybe proximity had something to do with the pictures she saw) before Nelda caught on.

No matter what was happening in her mind, it had made a wreck out of his own. He couldn't concentrate on work, or even

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Sonja. All he could do was stare at Nelda when he was with her and wonder and wonder. And when he was away from her he wondered even more . . .

He was going bat crazy. He was obsessed with it, couldn't get his mind on anything else. He had never believed in all that psychic stuff; it was a hoax, a ripoff, like fortunetellers at a county fair. There *had* to be some logical explanation for the things that had happened rather than the psychological mumbo jumbo that Nelda kept mouthing. Extrasensory perception, altered states of consciousness, precognition. Horse hockey!

Yet he couldn't come up with *any*thing that even partially explained how Nelda knew the phone was going to ring, that it would be a wrong number, or that the postman was going to deliver a letter from someone she hadn't heard from in years, or how—and this was the really scary one—she could describe a hotel room she'd never been in and even see him sitting beside Sonja on the sofa.

Could she have followed him that night, peeped through the keyhole? Common sense said no, that he was becoming paranoid. Nevertheless, he began seeing Sonja at lunchtime on the days when he knew Nelda was either playing bridge or meeting someone for lunch.

For a while, maybe a week, nothing unusual happened—except that Nelda kept reading those damn books. She would sit in her chair by the fireplace, a book in her hands, and every so often she'd look up with a strange little smile on her face, as though she knew an amusing joke on him which he wasn't privy to.

Then one night the phone thing happened again. He was watching the Bulls go down in inglorious defeat (what could they expect without Air Jordan?) and she was reading a book entitled *Authentic Witchcraft.* Witchcraft, for God's sake! Wouldn't you know?!

The phone rang and he reached for it, but she said, "Don't bother, it's for me. Sheila wants to tell me that our bridge game has been postponed until next week because her daughter's just been taken to the hospital. The baby will be born tonight."

He froze, his hand extended in midair, while she picked up the phone.

"Hello, Sheila," she said at once. "Yes, as soon as the phone rang, I knew it was you. You're going to the hospital to be with Linda, aren't you? Uh-huh, just my ESP at work." She gave a lit-

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tle laugh. "Give Linda my love. No, I can't tell you if it will be a boy or a girl, but it will be perfect. Yes, see you next week. Bye."

He turned the TV off. He couldn't focus on the game anymore. All he could do was stare at Nelda, his mind going round and round like a carousel, round and round and round in the same dizzying circle, getting nowhere.

She was bending over the bed, shaking him. "Hugh, wake up. Wake *up!* It's almost nine o'clock. You've overslept."

He turned over and groaned, opened his eyes then closed them again. "Go away," he mumbled.

"You're already late," she persisted. "Get up."

"I'm not going to the office today."

"Are you sick?"

Instead of answering, he pulled the sheet up over his head. He was sick, yes. Sick of all the craziness that had taken over his life. He felt that last night had been the ultimate blow to what was left of his sanity. He wasn't sure at this moment whether he could distinguish reality from fantasy anymore.

Yesterday he had decided that he was being overly cautious in seeing Sonja only during lunch, so after he left the office at five, he dropped in on her at the Cromley. It was nearly eight when he got home and Nelda met him at the door. "Hugh, the most peculiar thing . . ." she began. "Maybe you can explain it for me."

"What?" He was totally enervated and the last thing he wanted right now was conversation.

"When you didn't get home at the usual time, I started worrying, and then suddenly, my mind went blank for a second or two, and after that I started seeing those still-life pictures again. I saw a hotel room, not the same one I saw before, but—and this is what's peculiar—there were the same family pictures around the room that I saw in that other room where you had the meeting. And the same woman was there, that dark-haired woman, and . . ."

He didn't listen to any more. He started trembling and knew that if he didn't get out of her sight at once, she would notice that he was having an acute attack of anxiety. He rushed upstairs, calling as he went, "I've already eaten, so don't make any dinner for me." He went straight to bed.

The trembling lasted a long time; it was as though he were having a hard chill. Finally it stopped and he took long, deep breaths. Something had to be done. Things couldn't continue this way. He didn't want to give up Sonja, but he couldn't afford any scandal in

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his life right now (and Nelda would sure as hell divorce him if she found out) because Jim Beldon and Harry Nelms were both strong family men and absolute Puritans about practically everything. He'd have to stop seeing Sonja until after he made partner. Then he could relax a little and resume the relationship.

Nelda sat down on her bed and leaned toward his. "Hugh, I had the most peculiar dream last night."

Kee-rist, please! He didn't want to hear about her dream.

"You were in that room — the one I told you about with the pictures and the dark-haired woman — and all of a sudden a man came bursting in wearing a mask and with a gun in his hand. He said, 'You don't belong here, this is my territory,' and he shot you right through the heart. Then he took the mask off and went to the dark-haired woman and said, 'If I ever catch you fooling around again, I'll kill you too.' Then he kissed her and took her into a bedroom and . . ."

He came out from under the cover. "Nelda, for God's sake, have you lost your mind completely? That's the craziest thing I ever heard."

"I thought so too," she said calmly, smiling. "That's why I told you about it, so we could both have a good laugh."

Instead of laughing, he got out of bed and headed for the shower. "I'm going to work after all," he said.

His first thought had been to go to Sonja at lunchtime to tell her he couldn't see her again for a while, but then he decided he'd wait until the middle of the afternoon. He didn't call ahead, just went at three o'clock. Sonja seemed only mildly surprised to see him. "Gee, Hugh, I never know when to expect you anymore. You've gotten to be a real drop-in visitor."

He was trying to think of some way to break it to her gently that he was going to have to drop out for a while. "Sonja, baby, look, I've got something to tell you. I've got to . . ."

At that moment the door to the hall was thrown open and a man came in quickly and closed the door behind him. Hugh's first thought was, He's not wearing a mask; that's a stocking over his head. And then he saw the pistol in the man's hand, and he began shaking. "No!" he screamed. "Don't shoot. For God's sake, don't shoot."

"You don't belong here," the man said. "This is my territory."

He was going to be shot, killed. He had to get out. How? The man was between him and the door, and it would do no good to go

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to the bedroom because the man would follow. Sonja had backed against the far wall and was cringing there like a terrified animal. The hell with Sonja; her other lover wouldn't shoot her. Nelda had said as much.

He remembered the fire escape just under the balcony. If he could make it to that before the man pulled the trigger . . . He ran to the balcony and was climbing over when he saw the man coming out on the balcony, the gun aimed at his head. "Don't shoot, *please* don't shoot," he cried, reaching for the fire escape.

His foot slipped on the first rung and he tried to catch hold of the balcony rail but missed. He fell fourteen stories, landing on the concrete beside the Cromley's pint-sized swimming pool. The last sound he heard was Sonja's scream . . . or was it his own?

He was already sitting in the back booth when she arrived at The Tea Kettle. His name was Ivan. He was forty years old, had blond hair turning gray which looked the color of pale sand, brown eyes, a mottled complexion which probably was a result of teenage acne, and he was tall and skinny as a telephone pole. He had been a private investigator until his license was revoked three years ago. Now he clerked part time in a furniture store and took on "special jobs" investigating whenever one turned up, which was infrequently.

She slid in the booth across from him and, without a word, took a long white envelope out of her pocketbook and slipped it across the table to him.

Without opening the envelope, he pocketed it. "Gee, Nelda, it was so much fun, I should be paying you."

She knew this was a bit of fawning, not truth. "You'll find a little bonus in there, along with your fee."

"I wasn't expecting that," he said, obviously pleased.

"That last episode may have been a little hairy," she said. "You deserve something extra."

"I'd have settled for a few explanations from you about how you managed it all." He looked at her admiringly.

"I couldn't have done it without your help," she told him. "Not just any P.I. would have suited. Did I tell you I interviewed three before someone recommended you?"

"I get most of my jobs word of mouth. What'll you have?" he asked as a waitress stopped at the booth. "My treat today. Shall we celebrate?"

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"I'll just have a cup of tea and an English muffin," she said. "They don't have the wherewithal for celebrations here."

He ordered coffee and a pastry and as soon as the waitress left said, "Now tell me how you did it with what little information I gave you."

"Easy," she said. "Almost too easy. First I took home an armload of books on everything pertaining to psychology and boned up on all phases of it. Also, I made a point of reading the books constantly whenever Hugh was home. Then I started making up things to tell him. I told him about a fictitious bridge game in which I knew in advance every card that would be played. Then I made up something about a friend not joining another friend and me for lunch after I predicted she wouldn't. That was the same night I had you call at nine on the dot and ask if Jimmy had come in yet. I had predicted that the phone would ring and that it would be a wrong number. I think that call shook Hugh up a little. The second time I had you call—that was when I chatted on about Sheila and her daughter's expected baby—well, Sheila had called that afternoon with the information that her daughter had just been taken to the hospital."

"Yeah," he said, grinning. "I just listened and marveled. You should have been an actress."

"There was some luck involved also," she admitted. "I wrote a letter to myself from someone who never existed, someone I supposedly hadn't seen in ages, and then predicted the letter would arrive in the mail and what it would say. It was sheer luck that Hugh was home when the letter came, otherwise I would have had to wait until he came home to open the letter, and that wouldn't have been nearly as effective."

He broke out in a big laugh. "You didn't really need to hire a P.I., Nellie, my girl."

"Oh yes, I did. You were the one who found out who the woman was, where she lived, and all the vital information. All I had was a suspicion that he was seeing another woman. Also, getting into her two suites was a stroke of genius. I couldn't have done that. Knowing what her places looked like was really what did the trick."

"Simple," he said. "All I had to do was tip the room-service guy into letting me wheel in the trolley."

They were both quiet as the waitress returned with their orders. Then he said, "I'll miss our little sessions. Do you think we could see each other now and then?"

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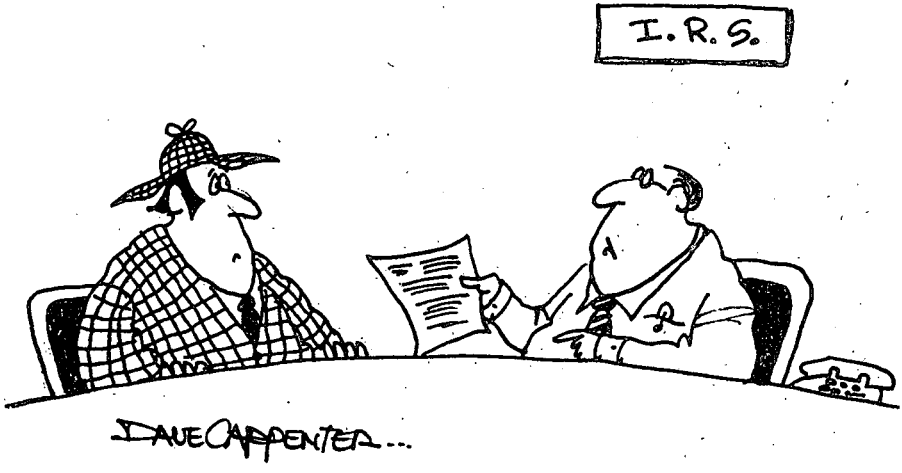
She was thoughtful for a minute. "Not right away. I'm going to do some traveling for a month or two. I always wanted to go to Paris for shopping, but Hugh was too busy to get away and too tight to let me go. Also, I thought a cruise would be nice, maybe to somewhere like Alaska. But after that . . ." She gave him her one-hundred-watt smile. "Yes, Ivan, I think we should keep in touch."

He sipped his coffee, looking at her over the rim of the cup. "I'm not sure but what you really *are* psychic. How did you know your husband was going to rush out to the balcony and fall and kill himself when I went in there with a stocking over my head and a gun in my hand? All I said was what you told me to: 'This is my territory, you don't belong here.' "

"I didn't know," she said. "I thought he might have a heart attack, or maybe a stroke. It never occurred to me he'd try to get away."

"But I never would have shot him, or the woman. Murder's not my thing. What made him panic like that?"

She gave a little shrug, then laughed. "It must have been the power of suggestion."●



"It's about these brilliant deductions of yours, Mr. Holmes."

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1996 Readers Award

Doug Allyn

Steven Saylor

1996 was the year of the series mystery in *EQMM*. More than half the stories readers voted onto our top-ten list employed characters who had found their way into print in previous short stories or novels. Happily, we can promise that several of these appealing crime-solvers will return to *EQMM* again in 1997.

The series that took first and second place in the 1996 competition belongs to one of this magazine's most compelling storytellers, Michigan native Doug Allyn. Mr. Allyn never intended his veterinarian sleuth David Westbrook to become an ongoing character. As he told us when he submitted the first Westbrook story, "Franken Kat," in 1995, he prefers to start each new work with a fresh set of characters. But Westbrook seemed to beg for more adventures, and even before "Franken Kat" tied for the 1995 Readers Award, Mr. Allyn had completed, and sent us, several new stories featuring the vet detective.

First place this year goes to "Roadkill" (May '96), a tale in which Westbrook is assisted by a badly mauled pit bull in finding the solution to a murder. Close on "Roadkill"'s heels, for second place, was another story featuring a four-footed Watson, a bittersweet whodunit entitled "Puppyland" (Sept/Oct '96).

Mr. Allyn currently has no plans to expand the Westbrook series to include novel-length mysteries, but he has been hard at work on other books. His new hardcover, *A Dance in Deep Water* (St. Martin's Press) will be coming out this spring, and a paperback edition of the 1996 novel *Black Water* is due out in paperback soon (also St. Martin's).

We congratulate Mr. Allyn on his splendid stories for 1996, and on his many fine finishes in the Readers Award voting. Since 1992,

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when he first came top of the list, he has finished among the top three finalists four times!

A brilliant third-place win for 1996 goes to Steven Saylor of San Francisco, California, for "The White Fawn," a story of martial intrigue set in ancient Rome and Spain in the period following the Roman civil wars. Like Mr. Allyn's Dr. Westbrook, Mr. Saylor's Gordianus the Finder, the protagonist of his winning story, was also featured in an earlier top-three story for the *EQMM* Readers Award: in 1993, only two years after his creator published his first work of fiction, a Gordianus story finished second in the balloting. Mr. Saylor has spent the intervening years establishing an outstanding reputation in the field of historical crime fiction, and is considered by many critics, including *EQMM*'s Jon Breen, to be the best author currently writing about ancient Rome.

Those readers who have written to us asking whether the Gordianus short stories are available in book form will be glad to know that a collection of some of the best of them, entitled *The House of the Vestals*, will finally be available from St. Martin's Press in May. All five Gordianus novels also remain in print (for the most recent see *A Murder on the Appian Way*/ St. Martin's), but the author does not intend to write another novel set in ancient Rome until he is finished with his current project, a novel about a true case of serial murder set in Texas in 1885.

EQMM congratulates Mr. Saylor on his fascinating winning story, and on his growing stature in the field of historical crime stories — the type of mystery story the founder of this magazine, Ellery Queen, considered the most difficult of all to write!

OTHER FINALISTS IN THE COMPETITION

Fourth . . "A Shipment of Snow" *by Edward D. Hoch*
Fifth . . . "Funny Story" *by Larry Beinhart*
Sixth . . . "Christ's Tears" *by Kate Wilhelm*
Seventh . "The Lazarus Gate" *by George C. Chesbro*
Eighth . . "Star of the Silver Screen" *by Janice Law*
Ninth . . . "The Promise Squad" *by Brendan DuBois*
Tenth . . . (tied) "The Banzai Pipeline" *by Clark Howard*
"*Luminarias* Make It Christmas-y" *by Janet LaPierre*
"Hoops" *by S. J. Rozan*

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Bird of Paradise

by John Harvey

John Harvey's career began like a fairy tale. Instead of struggling for years to get into print, he was asked by a friend to take over the writing of a pulp novel that had already been commissioned. The rest is history. Mr. Harvey is the popular author of a series of novels featuring British police detective Charlie Resnick, and has written many scripts for TV and radio. This is his first story for *EQMM*.

It was still surprisingly cold for the time of year, already well past Lent, and Sister Teresa kept her topcoat belted but unbuttoned, so that the lower part of it flared open as she strode through the stalled traffic at the corner of Radford Road and Gregory Boulevard, revealing a knee-length grey wool skirt and pale grey tights which Grabianski, watching from the window of the Asian confectioner's, thought were more than pleasingly filled.

He popped something pink and sugary into his mouth and smiled appreciatively. One of life's natural observers, he never failed to enjoy those incidental pleasures that chance and patience brought his way: a brown flycatcher spied on the edge of Yorkshire moorland, the narrow white ring around its eye blinking clear from its nest; a chink of light just discernible through the blinds of a bedroom window four storeys up, suggesting the window may have been left recklessly unfastened; the stride of a mature woman, purposeful and strong, as she makes her way through the city on an otherwise unremarkable April day.

Casually, Grabianski stepped out onto the street. He was a well-built man, broad-shouldered and tall, no more than five or six pounds overweight for his age, somewhere in the mid forties. His face was round rather than lean, and freshly shaved; the dark hair on his head had yet to thin. His eyes were narrowed and alert as he angled his head and saw, away to his right, the woman he had

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noticed earlier, passing now between two youths on roller blades before rounding the corner and disappearing from sight.

Dressed in civilian clothes as Sister Teresa was, Grabianski would have been surprised to learn that she was a nun.

The Sisters of Our Lady of Perpetual Help were dedicated to the deliverance of succour and salvation to the needy, those who were, for whatever reason, less fortunate than their neighbours. Or, as Sister Teresa's fellow worker, Sister Bonaventura, expressed it, the more economically challenged members of the urban underclass. Sister Bonaventura was a *Guardian* reader through and through.

Originally, the sisters had continued to wear their traditional vestments while working in the community and could often be seen setting up their late-night soup stall in the market square or ascending the steps towards the old General Hospital, for all the world like sumptuous magpies denied the power of flight. But with the decline of the city into an awkwardly romanticised version of its former self, fake minstrels and archers on every street corner and working models of everything from flour mills to four-loom weaving, no one gave credence to the belief that nuns perambulating in their proper habit were real nuns at all. Resting actors employed by the city council to entertain the tourists, drama students supplementing their grants in ecclesiastical drag, that was what people assumed. So now Sister Teresa and the others wore their simple white shifts and coarse grey wool only when they knelt to prayer each morning at six in the small community house where they lived, changing into civilian clothing before stepping out into the jostling world.

Most of what they wore came to them as a result of charitable donations or after-hours visits to the nearest Oxfam shop, though rumour, of necessity unsubstantiated, had it that Sister Marguerite's underwear was silk and had been ordered on approval from one of the boxed advertisements at the back of the *Sunday Times*.

The three of them, Sister Teresa, Sister Bonaventura, and Sister Marguerite, had been working together now for almost two years and in the summer they were due to return to their convent outside Felixstowe for six months of silent contemplation and spiritual healing. As Sister Bonaventura put it, an enforced visit to the health farm without any of the benefits of whirlpools or colonic irrigation.

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The house they lived in was attached to the community centre in Hyson Green, itself a former church which had fallen on agnostic times. Deconsecrated, it was home to a variety of worthy enterprises, from a twice-weekly mother-and-toddler club, through yoga and enabling sessions for recovering alcoholics, to the evening youth club and disco. Fridays, Saturdays, and alternate Thursdays, Sister Marguerite, whose room was closest to the dividing wall, was lulled to sleep by the insistently sampled bass lines of Jazzmatazz and the near-ecclesiastical pleading of black rappers whose every third injunction included the word "bitch" or worse.

This and other highly colourful expressions had been tagged on the walls and stairwells of the low block of flats Sister Teresa was now entering, no longer even bothering to try the lift, but walking instead up to the third-floor balcony where cat shit and used works shared space with several tubs of late daffodils and bright purple pansies and washing hung from lines diagonally stretched from wall to railing, railing to wall.

Teresa rang the bell of number thirty-seven and waited while Shana Palmer turned down the television, hushed the baby, pushed aside the three-year-old, and paused to light another Embassy Filter on her way to the door.

"Sister . . ."

"Shana, how are we today? The little one, she got over her cough, did she?" Teresa said nothing about the bruise that was thickening around the young woman's left eye. Eighteen, nineteen? For certain she had not reached twenty-one.

"Cup of tea, Sister?"

"That'd be lovely, thanks."

Teresa followed her through the narrow hallway, jammed with pushchair and tricycle, free newspapers, unopened junk mail, and broken toys, into the kitchen where the three-year-old pulled at the legs of her mother's jeans and whined for whatever she couldn't have. Waiting for the kettle to boil, Teresa looked out through the postage-stamp window at the block of flats opposite, almost identical save that more of them were boarded up.

"Biscuit, Sister?"

"No, thanks."

They went into the living room and sat at either end of the sofa that served as the three-year-old's bed, the baby cossetted in blankets and sucking on its dummy in half-sleep. In the corner, on TV, a modishly efficient woman in a floral-print dress and that morn-

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ing's makeover explained how to choose the best cuts of lamb from your local organic butcher.

Teresa waited until she had finished her first mug of tea and declined a second before leaning towards Shana and touching her lightly on the forearm. "Don't you think it's time, Shana, we had another talk about finding you and the children a place in a refuge?"

Grabianski had waited several minutes more before heading east along the Boulevard, his meeting with Vernon Thackray timed for the quarter-hour and Thackray, like himself, was a stickler for punctuality. And sure enough, there was the car, a dark blue Volvo estate, pulled in at the upper corner of the space on the Forest Recreation Ground allotted to drivers wishing to Park & Ride.

Grabianski skirted the parking area, so as to approach the vehicle from the driver's side. Thackray was behind the wheel, head resting back against the padded extension to the seat, eyes closed, the music seeping out through the inch of lowered window something Grabianski recognised as baroque and nothing more. Albinoni, Pergolesi, one of those. Vivaldi, he was certain Thackray would have considered too common by half.

He was three strides away from the car when Thackray opened his eyes and smiled. "Jerzy. Good to see you again. Come on, get in, why don't you? We'll take a drive."

The interior smelt of leather polish and astringent, doubtlessly expensive cologne. Anyone else who knew Grabianski well enough to greet him by his first name would have used the Anglicised "Jerry."

As they pulled out onto the main road, Thackray made a vague circling gesture with his head. "Find things much changed?"

Grabianski's response was noncommittal, vague.

"Three years, is it?"

"Four."

"I'm surprised you haven't been back before."

Beneath his coat, Grabianski was aware of his shoulders tensing. "I'm surprised I'm here now."

Thackray laughed and swerved to the inside of a Jessop's van that was signalling right ahead of the Clarendon roundabout. "Clumber Park. I thought we'd take a trip out to feed the ducks."

When he had last been in the city, those four years before, Grabianski had been partnered up with a skinny second-storey artist

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named Grice, an individual of notably limited imagination, save where gaining illegal access was concerned—there he was almost second to none.

Jewellery, that was their speciality, that and the few antiques Grabianski recognised as not only genuine but likely to fetch a good return; the baubles they sent by express to a silversmith with premises on Sauchiehall Street, Glasgow, the eventual proceeds making their discreet way into a pair of pseudonymously held accounts a safe interval later.

All had been going well until they had the misfortune to come across a sizable quantity of almost pure cocaine in someone's bedroom safe and Grabianski had allowed Grice to convince him it was a good plan to sell it back to the owner, a television director of decidedly moderate stature. Unfortunately, he turned out to be only holding the coke for one of the local suppliers, after which things not only got complicated but nasty. And that was without Grabianski falling in lust with the director's wife.

In the end, the only way Grabianski could avoid a lengthy prison term was to help the police with their enquiries, set up the aforementioned dealer, and turn Queen's evidence on his partner. The result, a suspended sentence and an invitation from the local constabulary to get out of town. And now he was back.

No wonder his neck muscles were uncomfortably tight.

There was the usual selection of mallards and pintails, along with a small flock of shovellers, consisting entirely of flatheaded, blue-winged drakes. Lower down, at the far northern end of the main lake, a clamour of Canada geese stalked the two men incessantly, greedy for anything they might have in their pockets and be prepared to throw away. The water looked grey and cold, its surface turning in the wind.

"I've had it checked four weeks out of the last five," Thackray was saying. "Leaves the house between seven and seven-twenty and never back before eleven-fifteen."

"Theatre? Cinema?"

"Bridge club. Up on Mansfield Road. Duplicate. Quite good, seemingly. Plays a modified Acol."

"Hmm." Grabianski nodded, unimpressed. He was a straightforward never-mess-with-a-minor-suit, four-no-trumps-is-strong-and-asking-for-aces kind of player himself.

"Here." Thackray took a sheet of graph paper from his inside pocket and the nearest dozen geese started honking in earnest.

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The plan of the house interior had been neatly drawn in violet ink, the position of the alarm in red, the paintings marked clearly in green, one angled above the other on the drawing room wall, their exact dimensions noted at the bottom right corner of the sheet. Neither so large that they could not be fitted into a large holdall.

"And the alarm, it's not connected directly through to the police?"

Thackray shook his head and they walked on, turning into a stiffening breeze. "Not anymore."

"Any idea how she got hold of them?" Grabianski asked. "Dalzeils. Hardly ten a penny."

"Handed down, apparently. In the family for a couple of generations. Gambling debt originally."

"Sentimental value, then. Seems a shame."

Thackray fingered a three-inch cigar from his breast pocket and let the cellophane wrapping waft out across the lake. "Look at it this way, Jerzy, what we're doing, it's a public service. Liberating art for the nation."

"At least there'll be the insurance."

"Not so, apparently. Let the policy lapse last day in March. Cost of the premiums, I suppose. Works of art like that in private hands, can't be cheap."

"So if she loses them she's left with nothing."

"Social work now, is it? Distressed gentlefolk?"

Grabianski growled and continued walking.

"At least," Thackray went on blithely, "they're going to a good home, so that's one thing you don't have to fret about. Japanese banker, anniversary present for his second wife." Thackray's face broke into a rare smile. "Just the kind of sentimental gesture, Jerzy, I should have thought you would have appreciated more than most."

Resnick had been woken that morning soon after four, without being sure of the reason why. The smallest of the cats was nestling near the edge of his pillows; he had lain there aware of a vague sense of foreboding, listening to the birds outside the window and watching the steadily brightening light.

At half five, certain now he would not fall back to sleep, he had risen and padded to the bathroom and the shower. By the time he had pulled on some clothes and reached the kitchen, the other cats had joined him, all save Dizzy content to wait patient by their bowls while Resnick opened a fresh can of food and found milk in

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the fridge. The six o'clock news summary told of slaughtered cattle and bankrupt British beef farmers, bombs in the Lebanon, first reports of a police officer being shot dead in Liverpool, more details promised as they became known. The magnolia tree that leaned across the low wall from his neighbour's garden had started, at last, to unfold into bloom. When he stood for a moment at the back door, staring out, he felt the first fall of rain against his face, faint and indefinite as if it too would not last.

He arrived at the police station early, earlier than usual; Kevin Naylor, the young DC who had drawn first shift, still sorting through the duty officer's report of the night's activities, breaking it down into categories before setting the file on Resnick's desk. Burglaries Naylor would initially deal with himself, the rest would be for Resnick, as Detective Inspector, to prioritise and hand on to the other members of the squad.

"Quiet night?" Resnick asked, glancing at a fax that had come in from Manchester CID during the night, asking for information about a runaway girl of fourteen.

"Passable, sir. Usual bit of activity in the Park. Three houses broken into on Tennis Drive; last one, the owner got up for a pee round about two, looked out the window, and there were these blokes lifting his twenty-three-inch Sony into a van."

"Blokes?"

"Two of them; another in the driver's seat, he thinks. Not sure."

"And the van?"

"Green, apparently. Dark green. If you can trust colours under those antique gas lamps they're so proud of. Old post-office van, sounds like, sprayed over."

"He wrote down the number?"

"Two letters missing. Like I say, the lighting . . ."

"Yes. I know. You'll get round there sharpish."

"First call."

The Park was not a park at all: a private estate principally made up of large Victorian houses sporting stained glass and ornate decoration and originally designed to show off the wealth and taste of the mine owners and lace merchants who had lorded it in the latter half of the last century. Now it was home to barristers and account executives and Porsche owners who never seemed to work at all. Smack in the centre of the city as it was, the place attracted burglars the way a mangy dog had fleas.

"Remember that couple who worked the Park a few years back," Naylor said, making conversation as he poured the tea. "One of

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them built a bit like you, big, the other a scrawny little bugger. Turning over this place when the bloke as lived there come back unexpected, took one look at 'em and had a heart attack. Big bloke called emergency services, hung around to give him mouth-to-mouth."

"Saved his life."

"What was his name now? Something foreign. Polish, wasn't it?"

"Grabianski," Resnick said, of Polish ancestry himself. "Jerzy Grabianski."

"Wonder what became of him then?"

Resnick shrugged broad shoulders. "Retrained, maybe. Paramedic, something of the sort." It was a nice idea and one he didn't believe for a minute.

Three hours later, when Resnick was in conference with his superintendent and Naylor was still out and about knocking on doors, Grabianski was watching with considerable pleasure as Sister Teresa crossed Gregory Boulevard. And a little more than an hour after that, Resnick selecting cheese and turkey breast for his sandwich at the nearby deli while Naylor checked through vehicle licences and registrations in the CID office, Grabianski was enjoying the fresh air and the ducks and contemplating the detailed drawing of the house in the Park which was home, just for the present, to a pair of watercolours by the British Impressionist Herbert Dalzeil.

Sister Teresa had made three more home visits after calling on Shana Palmer, that particular issue no more resolved than it had been when she had arrived. At lunchtime, she had stopped off at the Help Line centre run in conjunction with the local BBC radio station and busied herself with everything from sorting through the previous week's backlog of mail to counselling a fifteen-year-old boy who feared he might be gay, feared what his father would do if he found out, feared he might already have contracted AIDS.

She then went into the studio for her regular weekly spot on the afternoon show, answering questions from callers about spiritual and other problems that were bothering them, mostly, she found, the latter. As usual, she ended by asking for donations or volunteers for the Help Line, thanked both presenter and producer, and exited through the rear car park, having promised Sister Marguerite she would pop into Tesco's and buy a Sara Lee pecan pie for her birthday.

A dozen paces into the car park a hand grabbed at her hair, an

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arm was thrown tight about her neck, and she was wrenched backwards and thrown heavily against the rear wall.

"Help?" Paul Palmer said, brandishing a fist in Sister Teresa's face. "I'll give you help. All the help you soddin' need."

And he began to punch her in the face and breasts, kick viciously against her legs, and drive his knee into her groin.

Thackray dropped Grabianski at the York Street entrance to the Shopping Centre and carried on his way towards the London Road roundabout and the river; within the hour he would be safely ensconced behind closed doors in Stamford, hotting up his modem with faxes to the Far East and cryptic messages on the Internet.

Grabianski had one of the swing doors half open, mind set on a bottle of vodka and some designer potato chips, when he heard cries coming from somewhere behind him: cries of pain and shouts of anger from the other side of the narrow street, from somewhere amongst the vehicles that were tightly clustered beyond the low brick wall. Others, passing, heard them and hurried on. Grabianski vaulted the wall and saw the couple towards the rear door, the man lashing out wildly and the woman half spread-eagled on the ground.

"Come near my wife again, you interfering bitch, and—"

Palmer broke off, hearing the sound of someone at his back, half-turned, another warning on his lips, and met the heel of Grabianski's outthrust hand full force upon his nose. The snap of cartilage was dredged through snot and blood.

"Bastard!" Palmer tried to shout, but something blurred and muffled was all that emerged. Grabianski picked him off his feet and half-threw, half-pushed him across the front of a Ford Orion, Palmer screaming as he fell.

"Don't . . ." began the woman, easing herself up onto all fours. "Please, don't . . ." as she levered herself back against the wall, head sinking gingerly forward till it came to rest against her knees.

"Don't what?" asked Grabianski gently, bending down before her.

"Don't hurt him."

He recognised the dull sparkle of the ring upon her hand. Why was it they always defended them, no matter what? One of her eyes was already beginning to close.

"A beating," Grabianski said, "no more than he deserves."

"No, no. Please." She fumbled for, then found, his wrist and clutched it tight. "I pray you."

Something about the way she said it made Grabianski think

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twice; he recognised her then, the woman who had been striding out in shades of grey, and felt a quickening of his pulse. Somehow, instead of her holding his wrist, he was holding her hand. Behind them, he heard her attacker scurry slew-footed away.

The muscles in the backs of Grabianski's legs were aching and he changed position, sitting down against the wall. Sister Teresa, blood dribbling from a cut alongside her mouth, was alongside him now, shoulders touching, and he was still holding her hand.

She found it strangely, almost uniquely, reassuring.

She said, "Thank you."

He said it was fine.

She asked him his name and he hers.

"Teresa," she said.

"Teresa what?"

And she had to think. "Teresa Whimbrel," she said and he smiled.

"What's amusing?" she asked, though a pain jolted through her side each time she spoke.

"Whimbrel," Grabianski said. "It's a bird. A sort of curlew." He was smiling. "Notably long legs."

He looked, she thought, decidedly handsome when he smiled, and something else besides. She wondered if that something might be dangerous.

"But I expect you know that already," he said.

She was looking at the fingers of his hand, broad-knuckled and lightly freckled with hair and curved about her own smaller hand. And showing no intention of letting go. She nodded to signify yes, she knew. There was a bird book back at the community house and Sister Bonaventura had pointed out the illustration. "A black and white cap on its head," she had said. "Just the way we would have looked once upon a time. Those unenlightened times."

"I think you should let go," she said.

"Um?"

"Of my hand."

"Oh." He asked another question instead. "Was that your husband? The man."

"Not mine."

He could feel the ring, though he could no longer see it. "But you are married?"

"In a way."

Grabianski raised an eyebrow, continuing to smile. "Which way is that?"

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"A way you might find difficult to understand."

She lay on a narrow bed in Accident and Emergency, bandaged, strapped, and salved. They had examined her carefully, wheeled her down to X-ray and back on two separate occasions, confirmed that two of her ribs were broken, but that, aside from internal bruising, there were no further injuries invisible to the naked eye.

"Lucky your saviour, he happen along when he did," the nurse said.

"Hmm," Sister Bonaventura commented, eyeing Grabianski appraisingly, "so that's who he is. He looks a little different in the pictures I've seen."

She and Sister Marguerite had rushed to the hospital as soon as they had heard, filling the small cubicle with anger, advice, and concern. When the young police officer had arrived to take a statement, Grabianski had discreetly removed himself, returning an hour later with flowers, an artfully wrapped box of dark soft-centred chocolates from Thorntons, and a copy of the *Collins' Field Guide to the Birds of Britain and Europe*, with the section on curlews clearly marked.

"Are you sure you're going to be all right?" Sister Marguerite asked, declining a second chocolate.

"Perfectly," Teresa replied. "The doctor's assured me there's no need for me to stay in overnight. And they'll provide an ambulance to take me home."

"That wasn't what I meant," Sister Marguerite said.

"I know what you meant."

Grabianski's presence filled the cubicle to the point of overflowing.

Leaving, the sister pressed an extra crucifix into Teresa's hand for good measure. The curtain she left ostentatiously open, and after a few moments Grabianski reached across and pulled it closed. The bustle of Accident and Emergency went on around them, muffled but nonetheless real.

"There's one question . . ." Grabianski began.

Teresa laughed. "There always is. Prostitutes and nuns, it's always the same one: How did a nice girl like you . . .?"

But Grabianski was shaking his head; that wasn't the question.

Naylor knocked on Resnick's door and waited. Behind him, the CID room was the usual monkey house of movement and overlapping conversations; telephones rang and were curtly answered or

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left to flounder in their own impatience; officers scrolled down VDUs, pecked two-fingered reports from keyboards, doodled loved ones' names on the backs of envelopes, listened on leaking headphones to taped interviews. At his desk near the head of the room, Naylor's sergeant, Graham Millington, was sporting a new haircut and freshly trimmed moustache and an almost-new check sports jacket, in the inside pocket of which nestled reservations for seats on the London train and two tickets for that evening's performance of *Sunset Boulevard*. Andrew Lloyd Webber and Petula Clark in the one evening; it was almost more than ordinary flesh and blood could stand.

Naylor heard Resnick's call of "Come in" just above the sergeant's shrilly whistled version of "As If We Never Said Goodbye."

"Kevin?" Amongst the papers littered over Resnick's desk were the remains of a toasted tallegio and ham sandwich and several empty takeout cups still smelling of strong espresso.

"Licence plate on the van, sir. Likely belongs to a ninety-four Fiesta reported stolen out in Bulwell three weeks back."

"Dead end, then."

"Not exactly. Youth as reported it missing, Tommy Farrell, been walking the thin and narrow since he left school."

"Charges?"

"Fraudulently claiming benefit, passing stolen cheques, possession of illegal substances, handling stolen goods. Probation on one, the others all dismissed."

"Insurance scam, then, the car? Nicked by his mates, switch the plates, sit back and wait for General Life or whoever to pay over the cheque."

"It's possible."

"So if one of Farrell's friends happened to own an old post-office van . . ."

"Exactly."

Resnick leaned forward in his chair. "That piece of paper in your hand, Kevin—wouldn't be a list of Farrell's known associates, would it?"

Grinning self-consciously, Naylor placed the sheet upon the desk.

"Mickey Redthorpe," Resnick read, "Michael Chester, Sean McGuane—he's in Lincoln doing three to five. Victor Canning, Barry Fielding, Billy Murdoch, Paul Palmer . . ."

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Resnick looked up, fingers drumming across the name. "Aggravated burglary, Palmer, eighteen months inside?"

"Yes, sir. Released March first. Good behaviour."

"I wonder," Resnick said, smiling a little, "what the chances might be of finding friend Palmer the owner of a resprayed van?"

"A warrant or . . . ?"

"Too early. Take Mark with you, have a little nose around. Palmer's got a wife and kids, hasn't he? Probably not going anywhere in a hurry."

Naylor nodded. "Unless it's back inside."

Grabianski was not as cautious. And although he preferred making his way into other people's property under the cover of darkness, on this occasion he was happy enough with the sound of the *EastEnders* theme tune and the sight of the living room door to the Palmer's flat closing behind Shana as she carried through the three-year-old.

Paul himself had made his way from the betting shop to the pub.

Grabianski checked both ways along the balcony, inserted the strip of plastic between front door and frame, and slipped the lock.

As soon as he was standing inside, the adrenalin grabbed him, jolting his veins. Being inside: forbidden. It was like sex, only better, purer; more controlled. He stood for several minutes, listening to sounds, breathing the air. Then made his way silently from room to room.

There was a rusted bayonet at the back of the cupboard alongside the double bed and a shoe box containing half a dozen stolen credit cards underneath it; burglary tools were secure in a duffel bag behind the waste pipe of the kitchen sink. The baby was sleeping in the back bedroom in a cot surrounded by several thousand pounds' worth of electrical equipment, including a top-of-the-range wide-screen Sony TV.

Just as Grabianski stepped out into the hallway, the living room door opened and Shana stood facing him, the almost empty mug of tea slipping from her hand.

"It's all right," Grabianski said softly. "There's no need to be afraid."

Which was when Paul Palmer entered through the front door, a six-pack of Special Brew at his side.

"You!"

Grabianski had the advantage of surprise and some forty extra

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pounds in weight; he grabbed Palmer by the front of his leather jacket and jerked him forward, kicking the door closed.

"You . . ."

"You already said that."

Palmer's voice was distorted by the width of plaster taped across his nose. Grabianski spun him round and, firmly holding his shoulders, smacked him, face first, against the wall.

Shana screamed and Paul fainted, unused to having his nose broken twice in the same day. When he came to and saw Grabianski was leaning over him, he flinched.

"Listen," Grabianski said, "if you ever go near that person again, I will break every other bone in your body. You know who I mean?"

Palmer blinked and grunted yes.

"And you believe me?"

He did.

"Good," Grabianski said, leaning away. "A little belief, it's a wonderful thing." He turned back at the door. "It might be an idea if you stopped thumping your wife, too. I imagine there's a self-help group you could go to, men and violence, something like that. You should look into it." And he walked off along the balcony, taking his time, though time was something he had precious little of—the owner of two rare Impressionist paintings would soon be sitting down to her first hand of the evening, busily counting points.

Since Resnick had stopped using the Polish Club with any regularity, when he did appear committee and staff fussed round him like swans with their wayward young; which only served to curtail his visits all the more. But halfway through a bottle of Polish lager with only the cats and CDs for company, he made a sudden decision to call a cab and go, even though it meant exchanging *Miles Davis Live at the Plugged Nickel* for an accordionist with a ruffled shirt and his heart on his sleeve.

He hadn't been in the club more than twenty minutes when, reflected in the mirror above the bar, he saw, approaching, someone he had thought he was unlikely ever to see again. He waited until Grabianski had taken the stool alongside his before holding out his hand. "Jerzy."

"Inspector."

"Charlie would do. Not as if I'm on duty."

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"Ah." Grabianski smiled and ordered a bison-grass vodka, Resnick declining with a shake of the head. "Maybe not."

"No coincidence, then? You being here like this?"

"I phoned ahead."

"Something that couldn't wait till morning."

Grabianski shrugged.

"You're here on business?" Resnick asked.

"An old friend to meet." A smile spread across his face. "Two, if we include you."

It was Resnick's turn to smile. "That's what we are? Friends?"

They sat there awhile longer, not speaking, two men who might easily have been mistaken for brothers: big men with broad, heavy features whose families had fled their mother country in the first months of the war. In that room, with so many framed photographs of generals and fighter pilots on the walls, it was unnecessary to ask which war.

"Paul Palmer," Grabianski said, paying for his second vodka. The slight shift of expression on Resnick's face told him the name was not unknown.

"What about him?"

"If he was caught with a quantity of stolen goods on his premises, a few choice artifacts of the burglar's trade, what are the chances he might see serious time?"

"Depends. Sometimes, as well you know, there are extenuating circumstances."

"Not for the likes of Palmer."

Resnick thought he would chance another lager after all; if they were going to pull Paul Palmer it would be before the milk, and Graham Millington could take charge. Just the thing to get an overdose of Andrew Lloyd Webber out of his system.

"This isn't professional rivalry, I take it?" Resnick asked. "I mean, he's hardly in your class."

"Let's just say there are reasons for shutting him away where his temper won't do more harm."

Resnick frowned. "There's some history of domestic violence, I know. Is that what this is about? The wife? Shana, isn't it?"

"Not only her."

Resnick laughed. "I should have known with you there'd be a woman involved."

"It's not like that, Charlie."

"No?"

"Not this time."

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Resnick remembered the alacrity with which the television director's wife had taken Grabianski to bed, bosom, and bath. "Whatever happened to Maria Roy?" he asked.

Grabianski shook his head, grinning despite himself. "You don't want to know."

"And this time?"

"I told you. . . ." But Resnick was staring at him from close range, and for a confirmed criminal Grabianski could be a hopeless liar. "This is different."

"Yes," Resnick said, not meaning it.

"Platonic."

"Of course."

"Charlie, she's a nun, for Christ's sake!"

Resnick's laughter was abrupt enough to turn heads way back across the room.

"No laughing matter, Charlie."

"So I've heard."

"This kid Palmer, he went for her. Could have been serious. Angry because she's been talking to his wife, advising her, you know, getting into a refuge, taking the kids."

Resnick nodded. "How come you're so certain about these stolen goods? They wouldn't be planted, by any chance, to lend us a helping hand?"

Grabianski shook his head. "Not my way."

"Okay. This is the second time I've got you to thank. Always assuming it pans out."

"Oh, it will." Draining his glass, Grabianski swung round on the stool and rose to his feet.

"You'll likely not be around to see it go down?"

"Likely not."

"Well," Resnick stood and again the two men shook hands, "it was good to see you again."

Grabianski nodded and began to turn away.

"I suppose I'd be wasting my breath telling you to keep your hands to what's rightfully yours?"

Grabianski kept on walking, through the door, along the broad corridor, and out onto the forecourt, where he climbed into the taxi he had instructed to wait. Before it had pulled away, Resnick was speaking to Lynn Kellogg on the telephone, informing her of the cab company and registration. "Get onto their controller, find out their position; if you can get the destination without arousing suspicion, so much the better. Then call in Mark and Kevin, sort

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out the surveillance between you, let me know how it's going. Send a driver to pick up my car and collect me here."

Grabianski stood in the first-floor drawing room, heavy velvet curtains drawn against the night. He was wearing the same dark blue suit as earlier, smartly polished shoes, new white cotton gloves. He was holding a torch in one hand, a Polaroid camera in the other. The canvas holdall was on the floor near his feet.

He positioned himself carefully before taking the pictures, capturing the paintings separately and together. They were, he thought, a wonderful pair. The first, earlier by some fifteen years, showed a farm boy close by the half-open gate to a field, some half-dozen sheep in the middle distance, an avenue of poplars making a diagonal right to left behind. It was a perfectly respectable, cleanly executed rural painting of its time; the kind the Royal Academy in the 1880s would have cherished. Possibly still did.

But it was the second which Grabianski cherished, an earlier study for what most critics considered Dalzeil's masterpiece, "Departing Day." It showed a stubbly, tilled landscape through the blur of fading light, the sun a yellow disc, faint through mottled sky. Patched along the low horizon were sparse purplish shadows, whether outbuildings or carts, or even cattle, it was neither possible nor desirable to know.

What had happened to Dalzeil between the two paintings, Grabianski was uncertain. Had he been smitten by the influence of Seurat, sudden as Saul on the road to Damascus, or had he fallen under the spell of Monet, who had exhibited in London only a few years before this work would have begun? More prosaically, had Dalzeil's failing health and badly deteriorating sight meant that this hazy vision of the world was the only one he had left?

It didn't matter. For Grabianski, most of what gave him pleasure in painting was here: the interplay of light and colour, the shifting texture of the paint, the mystery.

It was exquisite.

He felt a thread of envy for the woman who had lived with the joy of this painting for so long and considered what he was about to do. He checked his watch and unzipped the canvas bag.

Divine turned his back in the direction of Resnick's car before uncapping his flask and tipping an inch or more of whisky into Kevin Naylor's coffee and then his own. Lynn Kellogg and Carl

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Vincent were somewhere off in the shrubbery, keeping guard over the rear of the house, while Divine and Naylor had positioned themselves to watch both the main entrance and the fire escape angling rustily down the side of the building. Resnick's driver had parked in shadow fifty yards along the street.

"Tell me why we're hanging about here like this, Kev?" Divine asked, "when there are nice warm pubs in spitting distance."

"Overtime?"

"Oh, yeah. Knew there was a reason."

"Hush up!" Naylor hissed. "Here he comes now."

They watched as Grabianski, somewhat larger than life, nonchalantly let himself out of the front door and headed for the low wrought-iron gate, swinging the holdall a little as he walked. Beneath the even crunch of his feet on the gravel came the firm click of a car door and then the sound of Resnick's feet approaching.

Fifteen yards along, Grabianski stopped. "Coincidence, Charlie?"

"Hardly that."

Grabianski scarcely turned as Divine and Naylor moved up on him from behind.

"You wouldn't care to show us, Jerzy, what you've got in the bag?"

Grabianski hesitated but not for long. "Why not?"

Naylor shone his torch as the zip was eased back; save some gloves, a torch, and a camera, the bag was empty.

"Not much of a haul," Divine observed.

"I've a receipt for the camera," Grabianski said, "if you think that's really necessary."

Resnick looked at him thoughtfully. "Why don't you come and sit in the car? Mark, Kevin, give the place the once-over just in case. Tell the others to call it a night."

Resnick told his driver to take a walk. He pushed a cassette into the car stereo and kept the volume low: Monk playing "April in Paris," "I Surrender, Dear." "Why the change of mind?" he asked. "Or was it a change of heart?"

"How about a conversion?" Grabianski's smile was as angular as the music.

"How about you realised the risk you took in coming to me was too great? You must have known there was a chance I'd have you followed."

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Grabianski leaned back against the inside of the door. "The truth?"

"What passes for it, maybe."

"You do know about the paintings? You know they're rare."

Resnick nodded. "A little. The owner was in touch awhile back about security."

"Always been a special favourite of mine, Dalzeil. Soon as I heard they were here, I had to see them. And what chance would I have otherwise?"

"Written and asked permission? Knocked on the door?"

"Not my way, Charlie. Besides, half an hour with one of the unsung masters, worth any amount of risk. Like standing up to your armpits in cold water for hours just to catch a glimpse of an Ivory Gull that's got lost on its way from the Arctic."

"Any amount of risk?" Resnick said.

"Come on, Charlie," Grabianski laughed. "You'll not bother charging me with this, scarce worth the paperwork. Besides, your lads, they'll not find as much as a speck of dust disturbed. And then there's always that small favour to repay."

Resnick reached over and clicked open the door. "London nowadays, isn't it? Notting Hill? Camden? Work enough down there, I should have thought. Art galleries, too."

Grabianski held out his hand but this time Resnick didn't take it; instead he watched in his rearview mirror as the tall figure merged into the dull glow of street lamps until he was no more than a purple shadow without shape or contour.

A week later a package arrived at the community house addressed to Sister Teresa. It contained two Polaroid pictures of a landscape painting, which Sister Bonaventura assured her was firmly in the Impressionist tradition, and a single feather, mottled brown and white, close to five inches long. Sister Marguerite thought it might have come from a curlew, but Teresa assured her it was a whimbrel and produced her book as evidence. There was neither letter nor note.

Only later, looking at the photographs alone, did she see, faintly to the side of one of them, the reflection of a man seemingly holding a camera. Her saviour. At least, that's what she believed. ●

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The Problem with the Pigs
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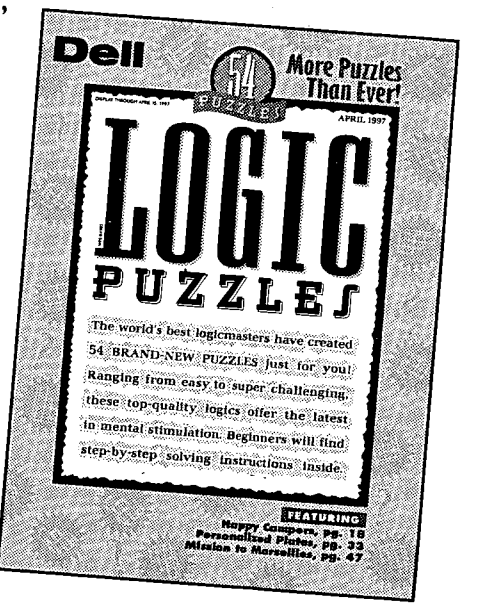
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